

PUBLIC

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Unfair trial / prisoner of conscience

CENTRAL AFRICAN
REPUBLIC (CAR)

Faustin Bambou (m), journalist

On 28 January, after an unfair trial, journalist Faustin Bambou was sentenced to six months' imprisonment and a symbolic fine of one CFA Franc (a Central African currency used in six countries; one CFA Franc is equivalent to 0.2 US cents) by the High Court (*Tribunal de grande instance*). Amnesty International believes that Faustin Bambou is prisoner of conscience, imprisoned for exercising his right to freedom of speech in pursuit of his professional activities.

Faustin Bambou was arrested by gendarmes on 11 January and detained at the Gendarmerie's Research and Investigation Department (*Section de recherche et d'investigation*, SRI) before being transferred to Ngaragba prison in the capital, Bangui. He was charged with inciting revolt, insult and slander (*incitation à la révolte, d'injures et de diffamation*). The charges relate to an article published on 21 December 2007 by his newspaper, *Les Collines de l'Oubangui*, alleging that two government ministers had embezzled funds that could have been used to pay government employees' salary arrears.

When he began his trial on 21 January, his defence team withdrew from the case in protest at the trial judge's refusal to accept their submissions that the prosecution were abusing legal procedure. The team had argued that Faustin Bambou should have been charged under the provisions of the 2004 press law (which protects journalists from being imprisoned for activities related to their work) and not under ordinary criminal law. The trial proceeded without Faustin Bambou being given an opportunity to appoint or being offered alternative legal counsel. He has appealed against his conviction and sentence but it is not known when the appeal will be heard.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In November 2004 the National Assembly of the Central African Republic adopted a law that protects journalists from imprisonment for activities related to their work. However, the authorities still harass, intimidate and detain journalists who publish articles critical of government officials. The government is clearly aware of the law governing press freedom but chooses to use charges that incur prison sentences as a means to curtail the freedom of journalists and the media in general.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in French or your own language:

- calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Faustin Bambou, whom Amnesty International considers to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for his peaceful and legitimate activities as a journalist;
- requesting the authorities to ensure that Faustin Bambou is allowed to appeal against his conviction and sentence, and that he is allowed adequate opportunity and facilities to obtain legal counsel to prepare his appeal;
- urging the authorities to ensure that journalists are not imprisoned for exercising the right to freedom of expression and to adhere to the 2004 law governing press freedom.

APPEALS TO:

Minister of Justice

Monsieur Thierry MALEYOMBO

Ministre de la Justice, Garde des sceaux
Ministère de la Justice
BP 732
BANGUI, République centrafricaine
Fax: + 236 21 611579/ 613198
Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre

Minister of Information
Monsieur Cyriaque GONDA.
Ministre de la Communication, chargé du Dialogue national
Ministère de la Communication
BP 1290
BANGUI, République centrafricaine
Fax: + 236 21 615985
Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre

Prosecutor
Monsieur Firmin FEINDIRO
Procureur de la République
Parquet de Bangui
BP 2891
BANGUI, République centrafricaine
Fax : +236 21 614478
Email : ffeindiro@yahoo.fr
Salutation: Monsieur le Procureur de la République

COPIES TO:

Minister of Foreign Affairs
Monsieur Dieudonné Kombo Yay
Ministre des Affaires étrangères, de l'Intégration Régionale et de la Francophonie
Ministère des Affaires étrangères
BP 930
BANGUI. République centrafricaine
Fax: + 236 21 613965

and to diplomatic representatives of the Central African Republic (CAR) accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 13 March 2008.