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Togo: the authorities must put an end to the judicial harassment of pro-democracy activists and human rights defenders

As the political dialogue between the opposition and the Government in Togo starts, the Togolese authorities must stop harassing pro-democracy activists and human rights defenders in relation to the widespread protests that have been taking place across the country said *Africans Rising*, Amnesty International and Front Line Defenders today. The organisations strongly condemn the continued detention of members of the Mouvement Nubueke who will face trial on charges, amongst others, of publishing false news, defamation, disturbing public order, inciting a riot, violence and threats against public officials, arson and voluntary destruction of public property.

The human rights situation in the country has been deteriorating rapidly since the eruption of pro-democracy protests in August 2017 across Togo, in neighbouring countries, Europe and the USA by the Togolese diaspora. Protesters are calling for constitutional reforms, including the reinstatement of a two-term limit for presidency. The repressive response of security forces, who used live ammunition, tear gas and batons against peaceful protestors and by-standers, led to violent clashes. At least 10 people died in the context of the protests, including three children and two soldiers. Moreover, protests organised in January 2018 by the opposition in Sokodé, Bafilo and Mango were banned by authorities on security grounds.

The organisations express deep concern at the recent campaign of intimidation employed against pro-democracy activists who have been active in mobilising citizens and taking part in the protests.

Mouvement Nubueke (a new day is coming) is a member of **Front Citoyen Togo Debout** (Togo Stand up Citizens Front). Mouvement Nubueke participates in demonstrations and puts in place medical teams to hand out water and assist demonstrators who are injured. Since 2015, the movement has been raising awareness and understanding of the rights of citizens and the application of laws, including by facilitating group discussions on social media.

On 23 January 2018, Atikpo Bob, local leader of the movement in Kpalimé, was arrested by the Service de Recherche et d'Investigation (Research and Investigation Service, SRI) agents before being taken to the civilian prison in Lomé. He was interrogated without a lawyer and charged with publishing false news and defamation for sharing a photomontage of the Minister of Security and Civilian Protection on social media.

On 19 October 2017, Messan Kokodoko, member of Mouvement Nubueke, was arrested at his home by officers of the SRI and detained at the SRI quarters in Lomé. He was subjected to ill-treatment primarily to extract a confession about his involvement in the protests. He was transferred to the civilian prison in Lomé on 31 October 2017.

On 26 October 2017, Eza Kokou Dodji, Vice-President of Movement Nubueke and Atsou Ayawo, ex-coordinator of Club Nubueke at Agoe, were arrested following a summons from the SRI and a search of their homes without a warrant. After spending five days at the SRI where they were questioned about the members of Nubueke they were taken to the civilian prison in Lomé. Atsou Ayawo has been granted bail, however, Eza Kokou Dodji's requests for bail have been denied and he remains in detention. They have been charged with associating with criminals, disturbing public order, inciting a riot, violence and threats against public officials, arson and voluntary destruction of public property, illegal possession of military materials and complicity in the above-mentioned offences.

On 12 October 2017, four human rights defenders, representatives of the movement *Africans Rising*, were prevented from leaving the country. Their equipment, telephones and passports were seized during the arrest at their hotel. They were questioned for several hours, without access to a lawyer. The human rights defenders' possessions were not returned until 17 October 2017 and they were later informed that the unit questioned local CSOs about their meetings with the delegation.

"These arrests are yet another attempt to silence pro-democracy activists. As the political dialogue starts, the authorities must guarantee that activists and human rights defenders can do their work without being subjected to undue pressure or intimidation." said François Patuel, West Africa researcher at Amnesty International.

The organisations reiterate the right of everyone to peacefully gather to exercise their freedom of expression and assembly, as recognised in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Articles 3 and 21, as well as the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Article 8.

"In times of political tension, human rights defenders play a critical role in documenting and reporting on rights abuses, upholding freedom of assembly and defending the rights of others. Their rights to carry out these activities must be guaranteed in all circumstances" said Andrew Anderson, Executive Director at Front Line Defenders.

Africans Rising, Amnesty International and Front Line Defenders call on the Togolese authorities to immediately drop all charges related to the peaceful exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, including the charges of defamation and publishing of false news, and to release all the members of Mouvement Nubueke unless they are brought to fair trial on internationally recognisable criminal charges. The organisations express concern about the judicial harassment members of the Nubueke Movement are subjected to as they believe it is solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights. The organisations also demand that there are investigations into human rights abuses committed in the context of the demonstrations, including the allegations of ill-treatment of pro-democracy activist Messan Kokodoko and the killings of protestors and members of the security forces. The suspected perpetrators must be brought to justice in fair trials.

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