

For immediate release

CAMEROON: UP TO 70 DEATHS FROM MALNUTRITION REPORTED AT PRISON CAMP

Amnesty International has recently received information about large numbers of deaths in atrocious conditions at a prison camp in northern Cameroon. Over the past four months, since December 1991, as many as 70 inmates are reported to have died from malnutrition and medical neglect at Tcholliré prison camp, described by recent prisoners as a "hell on earth" (l'enfer des hommes). Further deaths are feared in coming weeks as a result of seasonal temperature rises.

Many of the victims had been sentenced to death by Cameroon's courts, but a warrant had not been signed for their execution and in some cases they were still appealing against their conviction.

Although no official executions are known to have taken place since 1987, the death rate at Tcholliré is so high that it appears that conditions there may be deliberately harsh to provoke the deaths of inmates. The conditions are a gross violation of human rights, both depriving prisoners arbitrarily of their lives and of their right to the dignity inherent in a human being, and subjecting them to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Tcholliré prison camp, where political detainees were held in harsh conditions until the early 1980s, is situated in Northern Province. Over 200 prisoners under sentence of death were transferred to Tcholliré from prisons further south in mid-1990. There have been reports that as many as half these prisoners, at least 106, have died in one section of the camp, known as Tcholliré II. Normally, deaths in custody should be referred to the judicial authorities for investigation. However, as far as Amnesty International is aware, this procedure has not been followed in the case of any of the deaths of prisoners in Tcholliré.

Reports from the camp indicate that prisoners are stripped of all clothing on their arrival in Tcholliré II and placed in cells with approximately 10 other inmates. They remain in these cells both day and night, without being allowed out for exercise, and are allowed to wash only twice a month. The food served by the prison authorities is inadequate both in quantity and in nutritional quality. Each cell is provided with totally inadequate quantities of drinking water in a bucket which the occupants must also use as a toilet. Medicines and medical treatment have not been available to prisoners held in Tcholliré II, and medicines which prisoners have been able to obtain have been confiscated by prison guards. Conditions in April and May are particularly harsh as a result of extremely high temperatures and arid conditions at the end of the dry season. Prisoners who have complained about their treatment have reportedly been beaten and transferred to a special punishment cell where they have been held in absolute darkness for up to seven days.

Amnesty International has previously expressed its concern about harsh conditions and deaths in prisons in Cameroon. Among over 260 political prisoners released in 1990 and 1991, many had become seriously ill due to inadequate diet and medical neglect. Several were reported to have gone blind or nearly blind.

The deaths and ill-treatment of the Tcholliré II prisoners appear to be either deliberate or the result of very serious negligence on the part of the Cameroonian authorities. Amnesty International is calling for immediate and urgent steps to be taken to prevent more deaths.

Amnesty International is also appealing for an independent judicial inquiry into these deaths at Tcholliré prison camp, and for warders or other officials responsible for unlawful killings or other human rights violations to be brought to justice. It also urges that all deaths in custody should be promptly investigated by an independent judicial authority.