

EXTERNAL

AI Index: AFR 17/06/96

UA 250/96 Prisoner of conscience / Fear of further POCs 31 October 1996

CAMEROON Pius Njawe, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Le Messenger*

Freedom of expression is increasingly under attack in Cameroon, and in the past few days another journalist has been arrested and imprisoned as a prisoner of conscience. Amnesty International fears that attempts by the government to stifle its critics and opponents will intensify in the run-up to legislative and presidential elections, scheduled for March and October 1997.

On 29 October 1996 Pius Njawe, journalist and editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper *Le Messenger*, was arrested at the newspaper's offices. He was detained overnight at judicial police headquarters in Douala and then transferred to the Central Prison, New Bell, in Douala. He had recently been sentenced to six months' imprisonment.

Pius Njawe and another journalist on *Le Messenger*, Eyoum Ngangué, were initially sentenced to pay fines on charges relating to an article which appeared in December 1995 in *Le Messenger-Popoli*, a satirical supplement to *Le Messenger*, about draft amendments to the Constitution presented by President Paul Biya to the National Assembly. The charges were brought by the Public Prosecutor's Office; no complaint was lodged by any individual.

However, on 3 October the Court of Appeal in Douala convicted them of insulting the President of the Republic and members of the National Assembly ("*outrage par injure fait au président de la République ainsi qu'aux membres de l'Assemblée nationale*") and disseminating false information (*propagation de fausses nouvelles*) and increased the sentences to fines and prison terms: Pius Njawe to six months' and Eyoum Ngangué to one year's imprisonment. They have since appealed to the Supreme Court which has yet to make a ruling. Eyoum Ngangué has not been arrested and continues his journalistic activities on *Le Messenger*.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Violations of the right to freedom of expression have increased significantly in Cameroon. Attempts to intimidate independent newspapers have included censorship, the conviction and imprisonment of journalists, the suspension and seizure of newspapers and the arrest and ill-treatment of newspaper vendors.

Several journalists have been convicted of libel and sentenced to prison terms. In some cases, there have been serious irregularities in judicial procedures against journalists and prosecutions against them appear to have been attempts to inhibit criticism of prominent members of the government, or those closely associated with them, or government policies. Most of those imprisoned have been prisoners of conscience and others, convicted but not imprisoned, would be prisoners of conscience if forced to serve their sentences.

Paddy Mbawa, publisher of the independent newspaper *Cameroon Post*, was released in August 1996 after being imprisoned for a year. He was convicted in July 1995 of libel against a company director and sentenced to six months' imprisonment and a fine; in November 1995 he received two further sentences of three and six months' imprisonment after being convicted of publishing false information. Several similar cases against him are still pending.

In August 1995 Pius Njawe and another journalist on *Le Messenger*, Hirène Atenga, received two month suspended sentences and were fined after being convicted of libelling and insulting the Secretary of State for National Security,

following an article alleging misappropriation of large sums of money by the police. According to reports, the court did not allow the journalists to present in their defence information supporting their allegations. In August 1995 news vendors selling the newspaper *La Messagère* (which appeared after *Le Messenger* was suspended by the authorities) in Douala were arrested and detained. Pius Njawe and another newspaper editor were detained and questioned apparently after expressing concern to the authorities about the detention of the news vendors.

Amnesty International acknowledges that elected politicians, including the President, are entitled to seek legal redress for any written or spoken statement which they consider to be defamatory, but is concerned that the growing number of convictions of journalists for criminal offences in Cameroon restricts the right to freedom of expression and that the legal system is being used to prosecute people for their opposition to the government.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in French or English or your own language:

- expressing concern about the imprisonment of Pius Njawe on 29 October 1996 and urging his immediate and unconditional release as a prisoner of conscience;
- expressing concern about the increasing number of cases where journalists have been convicted and sentenced to prison terms solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression, and urging that no other journalists be imprisoned as prisoners of conscience;
- urging the government of Cameroon to respect international human rights standards, including the right to freedom of expression guaranteed by Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which Cameroon ratified in 1984.

APPEALS TO:

President:

Son Excellence M. Paul Biya
Président de la République
Palais de l'Unité
1000 YAOUNDÉ, République du Cameroun

Telegrams: President Biya, Yaounde, Cameroon

Faxes: + 237 221699

Telexes: 8207 PRESID KN (Secretariat général); 8595 PRESID B KN (Cabinet civil)

Salutation: Monsieur le Président de la République/Dear President Biya

Prime Minister:

Mr Peter Mafany Musonge
Premier Ministre
Cabinet du Premier Ministre
Immeuble Étoile
1000 YAOUNDÉ, Cameroon

Telegrams: Prime Minister Achu, Yaounde, Cameroon

Faxes: + 237 235765

Telexes: 8282 KN

Salutation: Monsieur le Premier Ministre / Dear Prime Minister

Minister of Justice:

M. Laurent Ezzo
Ministre de la Justice et Garde des Sceaux

Ministère de la Justice
1000 YAOUNDÉ, République du Cameroun
Telegrams: Ministre Justice, Yaoundé, Cameroon
Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

- *Le Messenger*, BP 5925, 11 Boulevard de la Liberté, Douala, République du Cameroun
- *Cameroon Post*, BP 1981, Yaoundé, République du Cameroon
- *The Herald*, BP 3659 Messa, Yaoundé, République du Cameroun
- *La Nouvelle Expression*, BP 15333, 12 rue Prince de Galles, Douala, République du Cameroun

and to diplomatic representatives of Cameroon accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 12 December 1996.