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CAMEROON: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS MUST NOT LEAD TO FURTHER HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

The Government of Cameroon should take decisive steps to ensure that all citizens can freely exercise their right to vote without fear of arrest, detention and ill-treatment during the parliamentary elections scheduled for 17 May, Amnesty International said today.

Critics and opponents of the government of President Paul Biya, particularly members of opposition political parties and journalists, have for many years been subjected to human rights violations and continue to be arrested and detained.

“We are seriously concerned that further human rights violations may occur during the parliamentary elections,” Amnesty International said. “The government must ensure that the fundamental rights of every Cameroonian to freedom of expression and association are respected during the elections. Anyone detained only because of their political opinions and activities, who has neither used nor advocated violence, should be immediately released,” Amnesty International said.

Large-scale arrests in North-West Province, mostly of members and supporters of one of the main opposition political parties, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), have taken place since the end of March this year. Many of those arrested were tortured and ill-treated at the time of their arrest and one person is reported to have died as a result. An estimated 200 people, possibly more, remain in detention.

The arrests followed a series of armed attacks on military, police and civilian establishments in several towns in North-West Province, where support for the opposition is strong. Ten people, including a gendarmerie commander and two other gendarmes, died as a result of the attacks, which the authorities have attributed to a group supporting independence for Cameroon’s two English-speaking provinces.

Amnesty International acknowledges the government’s responsibility to bring to justice those responsible for criminal acts. However, the organization is seriously concerned that many people appear to have been arrested and detained simply because of their association with an opposition political party, without evidence of involvement in any criminal activity. Some six weeks later, no charges have yet been brought against any of the many people detained.

Officials, members and supporters of the SDF were also arrested during 1996, in particular following the local government elections in January when the SDF and another main opposition political party, the *Union nationale pour la démocratie et le progrès* (UNDP), National Union for Democracy and Progress, made important gains, particularly in major towns.

Attacks on freedom of expression, which intensified during 1996, have continued into 1997. Two journalists are currently detained: Evariste Menouga of *l'Indépendant Hebdo*, arrested on 17 March this year, and Bosco Tchoubet of *La Révélation*, who was arrested on the night of 30 April.

Up to 10 journalists were tried on criminal defamation charges and sentenced to heavy fines and prison terms last year, often after irregular judicial procedures. Others were arrested and detained before being released without charge. Journalists have been harassed and assaulted and newspapers confiscated.

With the approach of the parliamentary elections, and the presidential election which is scheduled for October 1997, the Cameroon authorities seem set to continue to stifle criticism of prominent government members, those closely associated with them, or government policies.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Government of Cameroon to end harassment, arrest and detention of critics and opponents of the government solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, as guaranteed by the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by Cameroon in 1984.

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