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GAMBIA: DELEGATION VISITS GAMBIA TO MEET AUTHORITIES, NGOs

Amnesty International delegates are visiting the Gambia between 12 and 19 January 1996 with a view to meeting the Chairman and members of the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC) as well as other ministers in the government to discuss current human rights violations and human rights safeguards for the future. They also hope to meet representatives of non-governmental organizations.

Since July 1994 when the AFPRC seized power in a military coup, Amnesty International has raised with the authorities its concerns. These have included the long-term detention without charge or trial of some military detainees held since mid-1994, the detention and trials of journalists for exercising their right to freedom of expression and the arrest of more than 40 alleged supporters of the People's Progressive Party, the former ruling party, some of whom have been charged with sedition and others of whom remain held without charge. Amnesty International delegates will be pursuing their inquiries into such cases.

While the previous government was in power, Amnesty International visited the Gambia on several occasions to observe the trials of members of a banned political organization, Movement for Justice in Africa (MOJA), and some of those charged with offences related to a coup attempt in 1981. Amnesty International delegates later held talks with government officials to discuss the organization's findings, including the retrospective use of legislation, long periods of pre-trial detention and lack of defence counsel. In 1991, Amnesty International also expressed concern about a death in custody, apparently as a result of torture

The death penalty has been a concern raised over many years with the Gambian authorities. The organization expressed concern about the execution in 1981 of Mustapha Danso, and subsequent death sentences passed (but not carried out) by the previous government. It welcomed the abolition of the death penalty in April 1993 but regretted the retrograde step of its reintroduction in August 1995. The death penalty is a violation of the right to life and the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment, and Amnesty International campaigns for its total abolition.

Amnesty International delegates will also be seeking assurances that human rights safeguards are incorporated into the Gambia's new Constitution, in particular, the right to life, the rights to freedom of expression and association, the right to freedom from arbitrary arrest and the right to a prompt and fair trial.

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