

PUBLIC

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EXTRA 35/00

Excessive use of force by security forces

12 April 2000

GAMBIA

Fourteen people killed and at least 28 injured

Fourteen people were killed and at least 28 injured when security forces used excessive and indiscriminate force to break up student-organized protest demonstrations on 10 and 11 April 2000. Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of those taking part in further demonstrations anticipated in the coming days and weeks.

The demonstrations, involving hundreds of people, were organized by the Gambian Students Union (GAMSU) in Banjul, Brikama and other towns to protest at the death of a 19-year-old student, Ebrima Barry, on 9 March, reportedly after torture by Brikama Fire Service personnel, and the alleged rape of a 13-year-old schoolgirl by a police officer the next day.

The demonstrations went ahead despite a refusal by the authorities to grant GAMSU a permit. The demonstration in Banjul on 10 April became violent when the security forces tried to disperse crowds using tear gas and rubber bullets. The security forces apparently fired indiscriminately into the crowd when demonstrators began throwing stones at them, burning tyres and setting fire to buildings, including fire stations and police stations. Oumar Baro, a journalist and Gambia Red Cross volunteer, wearing Red Cross insignia, was killed as he went to help injured demonstrators.

The situation in the country remains tense with further demonstrations, some violent, taking place in other towns on 11 April. The authorities have closed all schools indefinitely and asked parents to keep their children at home until further notice. Soldiers are patrolling the streets in Banjul to maintain order. Of more than 100 demonstrators arrested, most have now been charged or released.

Government and police sources have said that six fire personnel suspected of being responsible for the torture and death of Ebrima Barry have been arrested, interrogated and remanded in custody pending a court hearing. It is not clear whether any of the suspects have yet been charged. An official autopsy, the results of which were made public at the end of March, concluded that Ebrima Barry died of natural causes. GAMSU insists that the government has not responded adequately to the alleged torture and death of Ebrima Barry.

Police have said they are carrying out a full investigation into the alleged rape of the 13-year-old girl. Although a police identity parade has reportedly been held, no suspects were identified and no one has been charged.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

After a military coup in 1994 the former chair of the ruling military council, retired Colonel Yahya Jammeh, was elected president in controversial elections in September 1996. Decrees were then passed banning politicians in the former government from being politically active and granting total immunity from prosecution to those who held power as a result of the military coup in 1994 up until the return to civilian rule. These decrees remain in force.

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

- expressing concern at excessive force used by security forces in breaking up demonstrations in Banjul and other towns on 10 and 11 April 2000 resulting in the deaths of at least 14 people and injuries to at least 28 others;
- calling on the government to instruct security forces to abide by the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials, which state that 'the intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life';
- urging the government to initiate a full and impartial investigation into security force violence, including deaths and injuries of demonstrators, at

demonstrations held on 10 and 11 April and asking that all those found responsible for human rights violations be immediately brought to justice;
 - emphasizing the need for full, independent and impartial investigations to be carried out into the alleged torture of Ebrima Barry by Brikama Fire Service personnel on 9 March and the alleged rape of a 13-year-old schoolgirl by a police officer on 10 March;
 - urging the government to ensure that those found to be responsible in these cases are charged and brought to justice without delay.

APPEALS TO:

President and Minister of Defence
 Captain (retd.) Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh
 Office of the President
 State House, Banjul
 The Gambia

Telegrams: President, Banjul, Gambia
Faxes: + 220 227034
Salutation: Dear President

Minister of Interior
 Honourable Ousman Badjie
 Ministry of Interior
 71 Dobson Street, Banjul
 The Gambia

Telegrams: Interior Minister, Banjul, Gambia
Faxes: + 220 223063
Salutation: Dear Minister

Minister of Justice and Attorney-General
 Honourable Pap Cheyassin Secka
 Ministry of Justice
 Marina Parade, Banjul
 The Gambia

Telegrams: Justice Minister, Banjul, Gambia
Faxes: + 220 225352
Salutation: Dear Minister

Inspector General of Police
 Inspector General Rex King
 Police Headquarters
 Buckle Street, Banjul
 The Gambia

Salutation: Dear Inspector

COPIES TO:

The Editor, The Point newspaper, PO Box 66, Banjul, The Gambia
Faxes: + 220 497442

The Editor, Daily Observer newspaper, PMB 131, Banjul, The Gambia
Faxes: + 220 496878

and to diplomatic representatives of Gambia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 12 May 2000.