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Gambia: Amnesty International demands the release of the head of its Gambian section

In a letter sent to the President of Gambia today, Amnesty International is calling on him to immediately and unconditionally release Mohamed Lamin Sillah, Secretary General of Amnesty International's Gambian section, who was arrested on 22 October 2001. The organization has also requested a meeting with President Yahya Jammeh and a delegation is preparing to travel to Banjul.

"The arrest of Mohamed Lamin Sillah is an open attack on all human rights defenders in Gambia. We consider it also an attack on Amnesty International and its worldwide membership. He has been detained solely because of his active work in defending human rights," the organization said.

"We are deeply concerned at the continued detention of Mohamed Lamin Sillah, a valued office-bearer and long-term member of Amnesty International, whom we consider to be a prisoner of conscience."

Mohamed Lamin Sillah appears to have been arrested for critical comments he made in a BBC broadcast. He is detained without charge, incommunicado, at the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) in Banjul. Members of a coalition of Gambian human rights organizations and Amnesty International were denied access to him on 23 October.

"We are also concerned for his safety in the light of a well-established pattern of ill-treatment of detainees at the NIA headquarters," Amnesty International said.

The arrest of Mohamed Lamin Sillah, 36, a former agricultural science teacher, is one in a series of arrests which followed President Jammeh's electoral victory, announced on 19 October. At least 13 members of the opposition United Democratic Party (UDP), were also arrested on and around 22 October and are currently reported to be held in police custody in Brikama and Mansa Konko. There have been reports of further additional arrests of members of the opposition coalition of the UDP, the Progressive People's Party and the Gambian People's Party.

Others who were arrested included George Christensen, the owner of an independent radio station, Radio 1FM, and Dr Moudou Manneh, a member of a coalition of opposition parties. Both men, now released, were considered by Amnesty International to have been prisoners of conscience too.

These arrests constitute a serious attack on the right to liberty, freedom of expression and non-violent political activity in Gambia. They are in breach of Gambia's obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The obligation undertaken by Gambia under these human rights instruments is that they should be implemented in good faith.

Background:

Since President Jammeh took power in 1994 in a military coup, freedom of expression has come under severe attack, both through repressive legislation and numerous arrests, harassment and ill-treatment of human rights defenders, journalists and non-violent critics of the government. On several occasions, President Jammeh has publicly threatened human rights activists and opposition politicians. His last such threat was made after he lifted a ban on political activities in July 2001 prior to the October presidential elections when he said

"anyone bent on disturbing the peace and stability of the nation would be buried six feet deep".

Following his re-election, President Jammeh is reported to have said that while he had been considered punishing his opponents, he was now set on reconciliation.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>