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£GHANA: @POLITICAL IMPRISONMENT USED TO SILENCE GOVERNMENT CRITICS

Ghana's government has been using political imprisonment to silence and intimidate its opponents for the 10 years since it came to power, according to an Amnesty International report released today.

"The government claims there are no political prisoners," said the human rights organization. "The facts tell a different story. In the past 10 years, hundreds of people have been imprisoned because they were critics or opponents of the current government. At least 50 are currently held in Ghanaian jails without ever having been charged or brought before a court, some since the early days of the government."

As well as the hundreds who have been held without charge, at least 90 political prisoners have been tried by special courts, where over half have been sentenced to death. Defendants before such courts have sometimes faced vague charges under vague laws, in a system that is clearly biased in favour of conviction.

Under current laws, anyone can be held indefinitely without charge "in the interest of national security". In reality, critics and potential opponents of the government have been rounded up after allegations of coup attempts and held on an indefinite basis. Some of those held in such administrative detention are prisoners of conscience -- imprisoned solely for their peaceful political beliefs.

In one recent case, a former government minister and a newspaper editor were detained incommunicado and without charge after the publication of an article seen to be critical of members of the government and the armed forces. Kwesi Armah and George Naykene were arrested in October 1991 and were still being held without charge in late November.

Major Courage Quarshigah and at least five others have been detained without charge for two years, accused by the government of conspiring to overthrow the government in 1989. Major Quarshigah, a respected army officer, was apparently seen by the government as a political threat. Another detainee arrested in connection with Major Quarshigah died in custody, amid rumours that he had been tortured. Yet another, a security police officer, escaped from custody in May 1990 -- his mother was reportedly arrested in June 1990, apparently in retaliation, and held without charge or trial until November 1991.

Once detained under an administrative order, detainees have no recourse to the law. The right to habeas corpus for political detainees was abolished by government decree in 1984, so the authorities are not obliged to bring them before a court. They may be held in secret, without access to family or lawyers, and may not be told for weeks or months even why they are being held.

But the fate of those political prisoners brought before a court has often been worse. Of 90 people charged in political cases between 1983 and 1986, 50 were sentenced to death and 23 were executed.

Most were tried before Public Tribunals, special courts where the bench is appointed by the government. There is a right of appeal only to another special court which is also government-controlled. The tribunals have power to impose the death penalty for a wide range of activities, including offences not previously punishable by death or even defined as

offences in law.

"The government claims it is better for prisoners to be held without charge, because once brought before the Public Tribunals they run a very real risk of execution," said Amnesty International. "The threat of the death penalty cannot be a justification for administrative detention - both the death penalty and arbitrary detention are violations of human rights and should be ended."

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