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KENYA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE OF 21 MEMBERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATION

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate release of 21 members of a human rights organization, the Release Political Prisoners (RPP), who were arrested in Nairobi, Kenya, on Friday 19 July, on charges of sedition and holding an illegal meeting.

This morning they were denied bail and are currently being held on remand in appalling conditions. All 21 have been on hunger strike since 20 July in protest at their arrest and are only drinking water.

“It is not acceptable that members of the RPP are being targeted simply for continuing to demand justice for the death of their General Secretary, Karimi Nduthu, and for campaigning for the release of political prisoners in Kenya,” Amnesty International said today. “These people are prisoners of conscience and as such should be released immediately.”

The members of the RPP had been trying to attend a three-day cultural meeting they had organized in memory of their Secretary General, Karimi Nduthu, who was murdered in suspicious circumstances on 24 March 1996. They were refused entry by riot police to the venue of the meeting, Ufungamano House, on 18 July, and returned on 19 July to try to speak to the Director. The police again prevented their entry and attempted to arrest individual members of the group. The 21 linked arms and refused to separate. According to reports they were then violently arrested by the police.

On 22 July they were charged with holding an illegal meeting and possessing seditious documents, which related to the death of Karimi Nduthu. The 21 appeared in court again this morning, 23 July, and were denied bail. They were remanded in prison until the next hearing on 19 August. The women are held in Lang'ata Women's Prison and the men in Industrial Area Remand Prison. The conditions in both prisons are known to be appalling.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned about the condition of Josephine Nyawira Ngengi, a former prisoner of conscience, who was released in March 1996 after two years imprisonment. She is recovering from a hernia operation which was caused by a rapid weight loss following torture while in police custody. A special request was made by Kenyan lawyers in this morning's hearing that she be granted bail but the magistrate refused, saying that she would have access to a doctor in prison.

Prison conditions in Kenya are harsh. In September 1995 a Kenyan High Court judge described them as “death chambers” because of the high mortality rate. He noted that “going to prison these days has become a sure way for a death certificate”. In October 1995 the Minister for Home Affairs, Francis Lotodo, announced that more than 800 prisoners had died since the beginning of the year. Prisoners suffer from severe overcrowding, insanitary conditions and a

lack of adequate food, clothing and blankets. In these conditions infectious diseases spread easily and there are few, if any, medical facilities.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Release Political Prisoners group was set up in 1992 at the time of a rolling women's hunger-strike, led by mothers of political prisoners, calling for the release of their sons. It is a non-violent pressure group which supports political prisoners and campaigns for their release. Karimi Nduthu, General Secretary of the Release Political Prisoners group, was attacked and killed at his home by one or more persons, so far unidentified, in the early hours of Sunday, 24 March 1996. According to eyewitnesses, the police investigating the incident searched the house and Karimi Nduthu's papers, computer and computer files, books and typewriter were removed.

Amnesty International sent a pathologist to witness the post-mortem examination. The doctor later informed Amnesty International that the conduct of the autopsy did not meet adequate standards. Since the death of Karimi Nduthu members of the RPP and other human rights activists have expressed concern at the apparent lack of progress of the police investigation.

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