

23 August 2000

AI Index AFR 34/002/2000 - News Service Nr. 162

Liberia: Attacks on media continue with the arrest of a foreign television crew

"The arrest of a foreign television crew is yet another attack on the freedom of the news media in Liberia", Amnesty International said today.

Four broadcasters working for Channel 4, a UK television channel and CNN, -- Sorious Samura, a Sierra Leonean, Gugulakhe Radebe, a South African, and David Barrie and Timothy John Lambon, both British -- were arrested in Monrovia, the capital, on 18 August. The following day, the Liberian Minister of Justice accused them of planning to "provide false and malicious information to foreign powers and the international community at large". In a statement made by the Liberian Information Minister the four were accused of using "pre-packaged information" to implicate "the Liberian government in the issue of diamonds smuggling and gun-running". Channel 4 has affirmed that the four journalists were "only engaged in legitimate journalistic activities during their stay in Liberia". They have also stressed that the four men had received permission from the Liberian Ministry of Information to film in the country.

Since the resumption of armed conflict in neighbouring Sierra Leone in May 2000, the Liberian authorities have come under pressure by the international community, including the UK government. They have been accused of providing military support to the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the main armed opposition group in Sierra Leone which has been responsible for widespread human rights abuses, and of profiting from the illegal trade in diamonds from Sierra Leone which fuels the war. The Liberian government has denied these allegations and claimed that its accusers lacked "concrete evidence". However, these

arrests suggest that the Liberian government is obstructing investigations and fears that such evidence might be found.

On 21 August the four men were charged with espionage and criminal design before the Criminal Court A in Monrovia. These offences are punishable by up to 10 years' imprisonment. Their lawyers were given no notice of the hearing and were not present in court. The accused are currently held at the Central Prison in Monrovia, where detention conditions are poor.

From the information available to Amnesty International the four journalists appear to be prisoners of conscience who were arrested to deter journalists and human rights defenders from investigating politically sensitive issues. Amnesty International has requested a copy of the indictment from the authorities but has not received it yet.

Amnesty International is calling on the Liberian authorities to release them as prisoners of conscience or, if there is credible evidence of any criminal offence, to ensure that they are promptly and fairly tried, with full rights of defence and according to international standards for fair trial.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International is concerned that human rights defenders and journalists in Liberia have frequently been arrested, threatened or forced into exile because of their work. Among journalists briefly detained this year were Suah Deddeh, Chair of the Liberian Press Union, in March, and Isaac Redd, a radio journalist, in April. In March this year, the government closed down the independent *Star Radio* station after it broadcast information about human rights abuses in Liberia. Among the human rights defenders, James Torh, a Liberian child-rights activist who

had been arrested and charged with sedition in December 1999 solely for publicly criticising the government, fled the country in March 2000 while free on bail, after receiving visits in the night by the Anti-Terrorist Unit. These special security forces have been implicated in cases of political killings and torture.

Political tension in Liberia has increased since July when opposition armed forces attacked Lofa County in northern Liberia from the neighbouring Republic of Guinea. The Liberian government has accused the US and UK governments of plotting to destabilise Liberia. An arrest warrant has been issued against opposition leader Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, in exile, and fourteen others accused of treason, for allegedly supporting the continuing insurgency in Lofa County.

Amnesty International has concerns about the fairness of political trials in Liberia, including recent treason and sedition trials.

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