

West African Human Rights Defenders Under Attack
'Be careful you, talk too much': violence and intimidation in Liberia

As a result of fighting in the border areas between Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone since July 2000, the Liberian government has become increasingly intolerant of any form of scrutiny. The security forces have used a wide range of methods including rape and other forms of torture to silence government critics. Human rights defenders, journalists, students or political opponents have been arrested, tortured or forced to flee the country.

On 21 March 2001, dozens of university students and professors were whipped and severely beaten by government security forces in the Liberian capital Monrovia during a peaceful protest against the detention of four journalists. The journalists had written an article showing how the government was buying spare parts for helicopters - believed to be used to supply weapons to rebel groups fighting in Sierra Leone - whilst civil servants' wages went unpaid.

More than 40 students were arrested. Some of these students were released shortly afterwards without charge. They carried visible marks of having been beaten - one had his elbow disjointed. At least 17 students were only released in the three following weeks as a result of widespread national and international pressure. They were severely beaten and at least seven women students were repeatedly raped in detention. On 18 April 2001, the university authorities suspended students' leaders for one academic semester and announced a three-month ban on student politics at the campus. The government had on 30 March dropped the charges and released the four journalists - whose detention sparked the protests - as a result of national and international pressure.

A long-standing pattern of repression

In Liberia, it has long been the case that people who point out the country's poor human rights record live under constant threat of attack, arrest and torture by government forces. Some have been forced to flee the country in fear for their lives.

In late 1998, two Liberian non-governmental organisations, the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) and FOCUS, a child rights group, published a report on forced child labour in Liberia, accusing government officials of being involved in the practice. **James Torh**, the executive director of FOCUS, was charged with orchestrating "a campaign of sabotage of the government's work of reconstruction through a massive disinformation campaign". In October 1999, James Torh publicly exposed evidence of torture at the military base in Gbatata, central Liberia, and called on the government to put an end to it immediately. After making a further speech criticizing the government on 15 December 1999, he was arrested on charges of sedition and beaten in detention by police officers. While on bail, James Torh lived under a constant threat of armed attack and was forced to flee Liberia for his own safety in March 2000.

At the end of March 2000, **James Nyepan Verdier Jr.**, the executive secretary of the JPC was reportedly told by an unidentified visitor to his office: “I have much respect for what you do and admire your courage, but be careful... these are dangerous days for you”. The JPC works to expose human rights abuses and calls for the prosecution of those responsible. In the months that followed, James Nyepan Verdier Jr. received several telephone calls warning him “be careful, you talk too much”, “your days are numbered”. The threats against James Nyepan Verdier Jr. have continued in 2001. After publishing a report exposing human rights violations in early February, James Nyepan Verdier Jr. wrote to the Police Director, Paul Mulbah, to complain about increasing threats and the existence of a plot to arrest him.

Criticism of the government from any quarter is not tolerated.

On 28 November 2000 about 70 men armed with knives, hammers and sticks, stormed the offices of the Centre for Democratic Empowerment (CEDE), a leading pro-democracy organization in Liberia. They stabbed **Conmany Wesseh**, CEDE’s Executive Director, physically assaulted **Amos Sawyer**, CEDE’s Chairman and former Liberian interim President, and destroyed computers and office furniture.

The assault followed a meeting of Liberian NGOs hosted by the CEDE, which had called on the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to take action to curb the flow of small arms and light weapons in the region. Small arms - such as rifles, handguns and landmines - are the major weapons used in fighting in Liberia and the neighbouring countries of Guinea and Sierra Leone that has killed thousands and forced millions to flee their homes. During the meeting Conmany Wesseh talked about his plans for the creation of a West African Action Network to prevent the proliferation of small arms.

According to reports, the attack was carried out by so-called “war veterans” - possibly with the backing of the Liberian authorities - in an attempt to stop activists from campaigning on democracy and arms transfer issues. The authorities have said publicly that they regret the incident. A high-ranking armed forces officer and seven others have been charged with aggravated assault and released on bail to await trial. However, others believed to be also responsible for the attack are not known to have been investigated by police.

Support human rights defenders in Liberia!

Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language to the authorities in Liberia:

- 1. expressing concern about the use of violence and intimidation against human rights defenders by government forces;*
- 2. urging the Liberian authorities not to arrest, harass or ill-treat human rights defenders solely for their legitimate scrutiny and criticism of the Liberian government;*
- 3. urging the Liberian authorities to bring to justice those members of the security forces who are suspected of torture or ill-treatment of human rights defenders and point out that they should be removed from official duties pending investigations of the allegations;*
- 4. urging the Liberian Government to abide by its obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples= rights, in particular the rights to freedom of*

expression and association (as provided in articles 9 and 10 of the Charter), by allowing everyone in the country to enjoy these rights without undue interference;

5. urging the Liberian authorities to respect the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders adopted by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998ⁱ which states in Article 1 that “everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels”

Please send your appeals to:

His Excellency Charles Taylor
 President of the Republic of Liberia
 Office of the President, Executive Mansion
 PO Box 9001, Capitol Hill, Monrovia, Liberia
 Telegrams: Charles Taylor, President, Liberia
 Salutation: Dear President

Mr Eddington Varmah
 Minister of Justice, Ministry of Justice
 Ashmun St, PO Box 9006
 Monrovia, Liberia
 Telegrams: Justice Minister, Monrovia, Liberia

Salutation: Dear Minister

Mr Monie Captan
 Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
 PO Box 10-9002, Mamba Point, 1000 Monrovia, Liberia
 Telegrams: Minister of Foreign Affairs, Monrovia, Liberia
 Salutation: Dear Minister

Mr Paul Mulbah
 National Police Force
 National Police Headquarters
 Monrovia, Liberia
 Salutation: Dear Mr Mulbah

So that human rights defenders in Liberia are aware of the action you have taken to support them, please send copies to:

The News
 Broad Street, Opp. Bureau of Immigration,
 PO Box 20-3137, 1000 Monrovia, 10 Liberia.

Lobbying of your own government

Please send letters to your Foreign Affairs Ministry - the Africa Desk or the Liberia Desk in your country - expressing concern about the torture and ill-treatment of human rights defenders, journalists and outspoken members of the civil society in Liberia and urging your government to *raise* the above-listed recommendations *with* the Liberian government.

PLEASE

SEND

APPEALS

IMMEDIATELY

i.UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, UN General Assembly Resolution 53/144