

4 November 2002

LIBERIA

Aloysius Toe, leading human rights activist, charged with treason

On 4 November 2002, in the latest of a long line of attacks on human rights activists in Liberia, Aloysius Toe was arrested, brought before a court and charged with treason. Amnesty International believes that there is no basis to the charges against him and that he has been specifically targeted because of his persistent and legitimate work in the defence of human rights. Aloysius Toe is a leading member of the National Human Rights Center, Secretary General of the Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders and Executive Director of the Movement for the Defence of Human Rights (MODHAR).

Aloysius Toe was arrested after he emerged from almost a week in hiding. On 29 October 2002, in the early hours of the morning, his home was raided by police and his wife, Vivian Toe, was arrested. She was released later that day. The authorities announced that Aloysius Toe was wanted in connection with documents found in his home which, they alleged, linked him to the armed opposition Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), which has been engaged in armed conflict with government forces since 1999.

Also arrested on 29 October 2002 were Dempster Brown, a lawyer and Chair of the Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders, Blamoh Sieh, a leading member of the National Human Rights Center, and Peter Nicholson, a research and security officer at the National Human Rights Center. All had been released without charge by 1 November 2002.

After Aloysius Toe presented himself to the police on 4 November 2002, he was taken to a magistrate's court and charged with treason, a charge which precludes the possibility of bail. A ruling by the judge on whether to hold a preliminary hearing was adjourned until 6 November 2002 and Aloysius Toe was imprisoned in the Central Prison in Monrovia.

Amnesty International is calling for all charges against Aloysius Toe to be dropped and for him to be immediately and unconditionally released. It is also calling on the Liberian authorities to end their repeated attacks on the human rights community in Liberia.

These latest arrests, culminating in charges of treason against Aloysius Toe, follow a campaign launched on 25 October 2002 by the Coalition of Human Rights Defenders, which brings together 19 human rights organizations, to secure the release of two of their colleagues, Hassan Bility and Sheikh K.M. Sackor, and others detained with them. The arrests on 29 October 2002 followed a radio broadcast as part of the campaign.

Hassan Bility, a journalist with *The Analyst* newspaper and human rights defender, has been held incommunicado and without charge or trial since his arrest on 24 June 2002 and Sheikh Sackor, Executive Director of Humanist Watch, since 25 July 2002. The government accused them of belonging to the LURD and initially said that they would be tried under military jurisdiction. No charges have, however, been brought against them, they have had no access to defence lawyers and have yet to be brought before any court, despite several writs of

habeas corpus submitted on their behalf. On 23 October 2002, the Minister of National Defense announced that a military tribunal had convened and concluded that they were “prisoners of war”. Such a definition has no basis under international law, notably the Geneva Conventions of 1949, in particular because the current armed conflict is internal and not of an international nature. The government subsequently announced on 28 October 2002 that they were to be released, but under certain conditions; a week later, however, they remain in incommunicado detention.

Human rights defenders have repeatedly been victims of arbitrary arrest and detention. The government has accused them of spreading false information intended to “tarnish the image” of Liberia within the international community and, more recently, of being members or supporters of the LURD. Aloysius Toe, and other colleagues at the National Human Rights Center, had earlier been arrested and detained for four days in March 2002 following the imposition of a state of emergency the previous month which remained in force until September 2002.