

AI INDEX: AFR 44/03/98
20 February 1998

PUBLIC STATEMENT

Nigeria

Government should not impose death sentences

In the month leading up to the official visit of the Pope to Nigeria, from 21 to 23 March, Amnesty International is calling on the Nigerian Government not to impose death sentences in the current treason trials taking place in the country.

The trial by Special Military Tribunal started of the deputy head of state, Lieutenant-General Oladipo Diya and 25 others, including 10 civilians, who have been accused of involvement in a coup plot, began on 14 February 1998. Others may be brought before the trial. They face possible execution or long incommunicado imprisonment. There are widespread fears that the government is again using such trials to silence its critics, this time from within the government itself.

The trial is taking place in military barracks in Jos, Northern Nigeria. Although observers, such as journalists, were told on 18 February that they could apply to the military authorities to observe the trials, they were also told not to report details of the proceedings.

The use of the death penalty in Nigeria is extensive. More than 1,200 prisoners have been executed since 1983, when the military overthrew the last elected civilian government. Most were sentenced to death by Robbery and Firearms Tribunals, but nearly 90 were executed following grossly unfair and politically-motivated trials.

In 1986, 10 armed forces officers were executed after secret trials by Special Military Tribunal. In 1990, 69 people were executed after a failed coup attempt. They were also convicted by a Special Military Tribunal. In November 1995 Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni companions were executed after an unfair political trial by the Civil Disturbances Special Tribunal, to international outcry. In 1995 trials by Special Military Tribunal resulted in 14 death sentences, but these were commuted after intense national and international pressure. However, 30 of those tried in 1995, including former head of state General Olusegun Obasanjo, are currently serving long periods of imprisonment in harsh and life-threatening prison conditions.

Many are reported to suffer serious ill-health and to be denied adequate medical care. In December 1997 two of those serving long prison sentences, Major-General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, former deputy head of state from 1976 to 1979, and Staff Sergeant Patrick Usikekpo, died in detention, apparently from malnutrition and medical neglect. The government failed to release any official statement about their deaths and they are both believed to have been buried without the required autopsy or coroner's investigation into their deaths.

Dozens of prisoners of conscience, including human rights defenders and journalists, are imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly. Chief Moshood Abiola, commonly considered the winner of the Presidential elections of 1993, the results of which were annulled, has been detained without charge or trial since June 1994. Eleven people, including a former Minister of Finance, were arrested and charged with treason in 1997 after a spate of bombings which hit military targets. About 30 journalists and editors were arrested in a wave of arrests in October and November 1997. At least six are still detained without charge or trial for peacefully exercising their profession.

In recent years Amnesty International has continually brought the serious human rights situation in Nigeria to the attention of the international community and urged the Nigerian Government to stop imprisoning, torturing and executing political prisoners.

Amnesty International is calling on the Nigerian Government to show concrete signs of commitment to reform the human rights situation by releasing immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience and by upholding fundamental human rights, including the right to life, the right not to be subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, and the right to be fairly and promptly tried according to international standards, in compliance with articles 3, 5 and 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In the weeks leading up to his official visit to Nigeria, Amnesty International urges the Pope to use his influence on the Nigerian authorities so that long-standing concerns about the contempt for fundamental human rights in Nigeria are addressed.

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