

AI INDEX: AFR 44/10/96
7 JUNE 1996

NIGERIA: THE MURDER OF KUDIRAT ABIOLA - A POLITICAL KILLING?

This week's assassination of Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, senior wife of prisoner of conscience Moshood Abiola, may have been a political killing carried out by government agents acting with or without the knowledge of the authorities, Amnesty International said today.

"It is imperative that the Nigerian government carries out a thorough, prompt and impartial investigation with the aim of bringing to justice those found to be responsible," the human rights organization said.

"Otherwise Kudirat Abiola's death will reinforce suspicions that the government has been involved in killing its opponents unlawfully, whether or not there is ever conclusive evidence."

Amnesty International is demanding that any inquiry into the killing satisfies the United Nations' (UN) 1989 Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions

Kudirat Abiola and her driver were shot at point-blank range by unknown assailants near her home in Lagos on 4 June 1996. She died later in hospital; the driver was reportedly wounded. Police have denied reports that they detained a personal assistant, Michael Adesina, who was unhurt in the incident. The military head of state, General Sani Abacha, expressed his condolences to the family, describing the killing as the work of armed bandits. However, other reports suggested that the killing was not motivated by robbery. The police have announced an inquiry by a senior officer and offered a reward for information.

Amnesty International fears that other government critics may become victims of political killings by government agents, under the cover of growing violent crime in Nigeria. Many opposition leaders have had their homes and property attacked since 1994, and some recent killings also appear to have been politically-motivated

They include the murder by gunmen of Chief Alfred Rewane, 79, a financial backer of the opposition National Democratic Coalition, at his home in October 1995. In February 1996 Alex Ibru, a former minister in General Abacha's government and publisher of the liberal *Guardian* newspaper -- under government proscription in 1994 and 1995 -- was shot and wounded; an unknown group later claimed they carried out the shooting to protect the interests of the predominantly northern military government

Kudirat Abiola was a persistent and courageous critic, continuing to call for her husband's release despite constant and vindictive harassment of her family and supporters by the government. Moshood Abiola was the winner of the 1993 presidential elections whose annulment by the military government has generated Nigeria's most serious political and human rights crisis in decades. He has been imprisoned since June 1994 on treason charges.

Since October 1994 Kudirat Abiola had been refused all access to Moshood Abiola; he has been held virtually incommunicado and in poor health. No lawyer has been allowed access to him since October 1995. The government has also interfered in his case, ignoring court rulings in his favour.

Kudirat Abiola gave interviews on several occasions to the foreign and Nigerian press in which she called for his release and accused the government of destroying her family financially.

On 8 May 1996 the Lagos High Court acquitted her of charges of conspiracy and making false statements. She was charged again with these offences on 28 May 1996 and the Lagos High Court ordered her release on bail to await trial on 17 July.

Amnesty International is calling on the Nigerian government to demonstrate its willingness to implement the human rights reforms which it promised the UN Secretary-General in May 1996 by immediately and unconditionally releasing Moshood Abiola.

“The political crisis in Nigeria cannot be resolved while Moshood Abiola remains imprisoned and his release would be a positive step towards restoring respect for human rights in Nigeria,” Amnesty International said.
ENDS/