

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 49/003/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 65
30 April 2002

Senegal: A unique opportunity to end years of impunity

Senegal now has a unique opportunity to restore its citizens' confidence in the justice system after years of impunity have undermined the foundation of the rule of law, Amnesty International said today in a report entitled: **Senegal: Putting an end to impunity: a unique opportunity not to be missed.**

Since President Abdoulaye Wade was elected in March 2000, the Senegalese authorities have shown signs that they are at last willing to bring those responsible for human violations to justice.

"The fact that a police auxiliary was charged and imprisoned in November 2001 after being accused of shooting dead a student on Dakar's university campus and that in September 2001 the Senegalese Head of State announced the decision that Senegal was ready to extradite the former Chadian President, Hissène Habré, so that he could respond to accusations against him for massive human rights violations, are undoubtedly encouraging signs of a new approach by the Senegalese authorities," Amnesty International said today.

A third event has occurred to further confirm this new trend towards fighting human rights violations. During two research visits to Senegal in June and November 2001, Amnesty International had the opportunity to observe that strict orders had been given to security force chiefs to stop the arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial executions and "disappearances" which the civilian population of Casamance had suffered.

Throughout the previous decade Senegalese forces had been responsible for serious human rights violations in the context of a twenty-year conflict between the Senegalese security forces and the *Mouvement des forces démocratiques de Casamance* (MFDC), Democratic Forces of Casamance Movement, an armed opposition movement which is demanding independence for the southern region of Senegal.

This stark and sudden improvement in the human rights situation in Casamance, which coincided with the election of President Wade, proves what Amnesty International has repeatedly said over the years, namely that the persistence and gravity of the human rights violations committed by the Senegalese army and Gendarmerie through the past decade cannot be put down to “regrettable errors”. They implicate the highest authorities in the country who were aware of what was happening but failed, either through lack of will or capacity, to take the necessary steps to stop them.

“Those responsible for these acts must be tried and it is essential that the hundreds of civilian victims get judicial remedy and financial compensation. It is especially important that the families of the dozens of “disappeared” people can discover what has happened to their relatives,” Amnesty International stated.

In Amnesty International’s new report, the organization lists numerous human rights violations committed by the Senegalese security forces during the past three years as a contribution towards the pursuit of justice

The report also denounces the very serious human rights abuses committed by armed fighters claiming to represent the MFDC and in particular several attacks launched against unarmed civilians in 2001 when some 20 civilians were cold-bloodedly executed solely because they did not have a Casamançais family name.

A memorandum containing this information was submitted to both the Senegalese authorities and the MFDC several months before this report is being made public. Although in the past all Amnesty International’s information had been systematically denied, especially by the Senegalese authorities, on this occasion, none of the concrete examples of extrajudicial execution, “disappearance” or deliberate and arbitrary killing has been specifically challenged by either side.

This recognition that serious abuses have indeed been committed with total impunity over the years is a source of encouragement, but no one suspected of committing these acts has yet been brought to justice which is indicative of internal resistance to putting a complete end to impunity.

“Promises are not enough for the Senegalese population as a whole and especially not for the victims and their families in particular. Without concrete steps, such as independent inquiries which result in the conviction of those responsible for human rights abuses and compensation for the victims, Senegalese society runs a great risk of missing this unique opportunity to rediscover confidence in its judicial system and in the foundations of the rule of law itself,” Amnesty International said.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413

5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>