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Togo: Commission of inquiry -- time for truth and justice

"There is no doubt that bodies have been discovered on the shores of Benin, at least one hundred of them out at sea"... -- The League for Human Rights Defence of Benin

"The sea vomited bodies..." -- Le Figaro, France

"Dead bodies have been found there case up by the sea..." -- L'Aurore, Togo

Amnesty International's new report released today, documents continued human rights violations in Togo and confirms earlier reports that bodies were washed up on the beaches of Togo and Benin, as well as being seen floating in the sea around Benin for at least four days following the June 1998 presidential elections.

When Amnesty International released its previous report, *"Rule of Terror"*, on 5 May 1999, the Togolese authorities announced their intention to take legal action against the organization. These proceedings have just now been suspended and Togo has agreed to invite an international commission of inquiry to investigate the reported killings.

The new report, *"Time for accountability -- The pressing case for an international commission of inquiry"*, is a compilation of investigative reports undertaken by journalists and other human rights organizations which corroborate Amnesty International's original findings.

The League for Human Rights Defence of Benin (LDH), for example, undertook a lengthy investigation in Benin between June and July of this year and concluded that *"...there is no doubt that bodies have been discovered on the shores of Benin, at least one hundred of them out at sea"*. According to their reports, several corpses were *"almost naked, in underpants"* and one of them was handcuffed and showed signs of torture.

In addition, the new Amnesty International report documents the Togolese authorities' efforts to impose a silence over the human rights violations denounced by Amnesty International, through a concerted campaign of intimidation, bribery and threats against witnesses, journalists and human rights defenders.

Koffi Antoine Nadjombe, Campaign Director of the Togolese Section of Amnesty International, was arrested in what can be seen as an attempt to directly target the organization. Members of the security forces reportedly attempted to bribe him to make a public statement against the Secretary General of Amnesty International, Pierre Sané, to say that he was the author of the 5 May 1999 report and had published it in league with leading members of the Togolese opposition to discredit the Togolese government. Koffi Nadjombe was also beaten up and allegedly threatened with fatal injections if he refused to make the statement.

Two other human rights defenders, Tengue Nestor and Gayibor François were arrested and eventually released on bail on 18 June 1999, but the charges against them of "attacking the credibility and security of the State, spreading false information and using forged documents" are still pending.

Ameen Ayodele, a member of Amnesty International's Nigerian section, was also arrested and held incomunicado for nine days in May 1999. During his detention, most of which he spent entirely naked, he was regularly beaten up and threatened with execution.

The Togolese authorities also reportedly resorted to bribery in an attempt to conceal evidence. In July 1999 the Beninese newspaper *La Nation* conducted an investigation and discovered that Beninese citizens had traveled to Lomé to testify against Amnesty International's findings in exchange for money. It would also appear that several Beninese journalists received large sums of money to discredit the reports of Amnesty International and the League for Human Rights Defence of Benin (LDH).

The Togolese authorities have finally accepted the establishment of an international commission of inquiry, something which Amnesty International has been continuously calling for since the publication of its 5 May 1999 report. However, the human rights organization stresses that the commission must be able to work completely independently and with the full cooperation of the Togolese authorities.

"All this corroborating evidence highlights the urgent need for a thorough investigation of the serious human rights violations committed by the Togolese authorities with complete impunity over the past 30 years," Amnesty International concluded.

Notes to correspondents:

Quotes at start:

Patrick de Saint Exupéry, a journalist from the French daily paper, *Le Figaro*, traveled to Benin in June this year to undertake his own inquiry. He gathered testimonies from Beninese fishermen who told him: *"We can testify to the truth of the deaths(...) The sea vomited bodies(...) We wonder if there's a war going on over there. Because we found the dead bodies in a state of disorder."*

Two Togolese journalists pointed out in August 1998 -- ten months before the publication of the Amnesty International's report -- the presence of corpses thrown in the sea. The newspaper *L'Aurore* wrote: *"Recently something terrible has been happening on our shoreline. Dead bodies have been found there cast up by the sea."*

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For more information or to receive a copy of the new report please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on + 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>