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Burkina Faso: Amnesty International Welcomes Progress in the Norbert Zongo Case

Amnesty International today welcomed the indictment on charges of murder and arson brought against warrant officer Marcel Kafando in the 1998 murders of journalist Norbert Zongo and three friends.

"By bringing charges against one of the key suspects in the case of Norbert Zongo the Burkinabe authorities have taken an important first step towards ending impunity for those responsible for the death of Norbert Zongo and his companions," the organization said today.

Amnesty International is reiterating its demands that the judiciary must be allowed to act with full independence and work towards a fair and prompt trial of all those involved in the killings.

For two years, no one had been charged, although in May 1999 the Independent Commission of Inquiry had named six members of the Regiment de la Securite Presidentielle (the presidential security service), including Marcel Kafando as serious suspects, and had recommended that judicial proceedings be brought against them.

Background

On 13 December, 1998, the badly burned body of Norbert Zongo, editor-in-chief of the independent weekly newspaper L'Independant, was found with those of three other passengers in a vehicle near Sapouy (100 kilometres south of Ouagadougou). The other victims were his brother, Ernest Zongo, chauffeur Ablasse Nikiema, and Blaise Ilboudo. The Independent Commission of Inquiry concluded that Norbert Zongo was killed for purely political reasons because of his investigative work into the death of David Ouedraogo.

In January 1999, Francois Campoare, President Blaise Campoare's brother, was charged with murder and harbouring the body of the victim in connection with the death of David Ouedraogo, his chauffeur, who had died as a result of torture in January 1998. The charges were later dropped by a military tribunal after Francois Campoare appealed against them.

In August 2000, five members of the presidential security were charged with murder. Marcel Kafando, Edmond Koama and Ousseini Yaro, who are also suspects in the Norbert Zongo case, were convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Edmond Koama died on January 4, 2001.

Since the death of Norbert Zongo, the government of Burkina Faso has frequently reacted adversely to public demands for an end to impunity in the country. Members of a coalition formed to pressure for the prosecution of the murderers of Norbert Zongo and for an end to impunity in Burkina Faso have been arrested and detained. Demonstrations against impunity have been prevented or violently dispersed by the security forces.

The government also banned the International Media Festival scheduled for Ouagadougou from 13 to 15 December, 2000, to commemorate Norbert Zongo's death. Delegates from press and human rights organisations from all over Africa, and international non-governmental organisations like Reporters Sans Frontieres, Article 19, International PEN, and Amnesty International were to participate in the event to discuss the protection of journalists and the role of the press and human rights defenders in African countries.

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