
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE 285/94

TO: PRESS OFFICERS
FROM: IS PRESS OFFICE
DATE: 19 DECEMBER 1994

AI INDEX: NWS 11/285/94
DISTR: SC/PO
NO OF WORDS:771

NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: EXTERNAL - **NIGERIA** (sent to wire agencies and targeted international media)

INTERNATIONAL NEWS RELEASES

Sudan - 25 January - SEE NEWS SERVICES 275 AND 261

Turkey - 8 February - SEE NEWS SERVICE 261

Northern Iraq - 28 February - SEE NEWS SERVICE 266

TARGETED AND LIMITED NEWS RELEASES

News Service 285/94
AI INDEX: AFR 44/WU 06/94
19 DECEMBER 1994

NIGERIA: BLATANT CONTEMPT FOR RULE OF LAW

The Nigerian authorities' contempt for the rule of law has been even more blatant in recent weeks as new decrees have completely tied the hands of the courts in defending basic human rights, Amnesty International said today after returning from a 10-day visit to the country.

"A striking example of the machinery of repression being put in place is a new decree which removes the most fundamental protection against arbitrary detention, the right of habeus corpus," said the leader of the delegation, Tiébilé Dramé -- a former Minister of Foreign Affairs in Mali and until recently an official of the United Nations Civilian Mission in Haiti.

The decree -- which lawyers first learned about on 29 November -- prevents the courts from ordering detainees to be produced before them or from challenging detentions by the security forces.

During their visit, Amnesty International's delegates were denied access to detained trade union leaders, to leading members of the Ogoni community held in Rivers State, and to pro-democracy activists including Moshood Abiola, elected in the annulled June 1993 presidential elections and awaiting trial for treason.

The authorities met by the delegates, including the Attorney General of the Federation, were unable to authorize them to visit prisoners and forwarded the delegation's request to the highest officials, but no response had been received by the end of the visit.

"The authorities' failure to allow Amnesty International access to political prisoners suggests that they have something to hide", said Mr Dramé.

The authorities told the delegates that no more than 10 security detainees were still held without charge or trial and confirmed that leading trade unionist Chief Frank Ovie Kokori was in detention. His detention since August by the security forces had previously been denied. However, his whereabouts and those of three other trade union leaders detained since August and September remain unknown.

In numerous cases in recent months, the government has ignored court rulings and then passed decrees to prevent interference by the judiciary. Another new decree overturns a court ruling that the short-lived Interim National Government of 1993 was illegal, a decision which threatened the legality of the present military government of General Sani Abacha. According

to a government statement last week, banning orders have been extended indefinitely on three leading newspapers.

In a meeting with the delegation, covered by the local press, Alhaji Aminu Saleh, Secretary to the Government of the Federation, denied that there were prisoners of conscience in Nigeria and suggested that those detained were terrorists or economic saboteurs. He said that the onus was on them to prove that they did not "offend the nation".

In Rivers State, the delegation was not allowed to carry out investigations in Ogoniland, where there were extrajudicial executions and detentions by the security forces in mid-1994, unless accompanied by government officials. These conditions were unacceptable to Amnesty International's delegates in the current climate of tension and controversy surrounding the forthcoming murder trial of Ogoni leaders. About 30 Ogoni detainees have been held in incommunicado detention for several months, uncharged and denied access to families and lawyers. The authorities say that their trial may start within days or weeks. It is to be before a special court appointed by the government and Amnesty International is concerned that it will not be fair or conducted according to international standards to which Nigeria's government is bound.

While welcoming the release on Friday (16 December) of 71-year-old Chief Anthony Enahoro, a former government minister detained without charge or trial since August, Amnesty International continues to call on the Nigerian authorities to release prisoners of conscience and all other political detainees unless they are to be charged and tried promptly and fairly with recognizably criminal offences.

Non-governmental organizations met by the delegation expressed disappointment at the lack of interest by the international community in what is happening in Nigeria and at Western governments' failure to put pressure on the Nigerian authorities over human rights violations.

Amnesty International urges the international community and governments with particular influence on the Nigerian authorities - such as France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States of America - to press the Nigerian government to improve its human rights record and restore the rule of law.

ENDS\