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Cameroon: Acquittal of 'gay' men jailed for wearing women's clothes exposes discrimination

The acquittal of two Cameroonian men jailed for "looking gay" because they wore women's clothes exposes the systematic discrimination against perceived homosexuals in the country, Amnesty International said today as the pair's convictions were overturned by an appeals court.

Jonas Kimie and Franky Ndome have spent more than a year in prison following their arrest outside a nightclub in the capital Yaoundé in July 2011. They are among numerous people in Cameroon who have faced persecution for their perceived homosexuality.

The two men are awaiting release from jail after Yaoundé's Court of Appeal yesterday declared them innocent of homosexuality.

"Jonas Kimie and Franky Ndome must now be released without delay," said Godfrey Byaruhanga, central Africa researcher at Amnesty International.

"The appeal court's ruling is a positive step, but the Cameroon authorities must do more to end discrimination of people accused of same-sex relations."

Jonas Kimie and Franky Ndome were wearing women's clothing at the time of their arrest. They deny the police's claim that they were having oral sex in a taxi they were travelling in.

"We have been imprisoned for dressing differently," Franky Ndome told Amnesty International last month.

Ndome and Kimie said they been subjected to violence and prejudice from prison authorities and other inmates while in jail.

Ndome told Amnesty International that in June 2012 he was beaten by prison guards for refusing to plait a female guard's hair.

Violence, arbitrary arrests and other human rights violations targeting individuals because of their real or perceived sexual orientation are commonplace in Cameroon, and have been on the increase since the mid-2000s.

Jean-Claude Roger Mbede was arrested in March 2011 after sending a text to a man saying that he was in love with him.

He suffered from malnutrition and regular beatings in jail, and his three-year prison sentence was upheld in December.

Victims of abuse are often too scared to seek protection from the police, who often participate in the abuse with complete impunity.

Amnesty International's upcoming report on human rights concerns in Cameroon, due to be published later this month, documents cases of harassment of perceived Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersexual (LGBTI) people in the country.

"The Cameroon authorities routinely ignore violence and discrimination against LGBTI people and this must be addressed," said Byaruhanga.