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Cameroon: End impunity for grave human rights violations

People in Cameroon are being subjected to a raft of abuses including unlawful killings and torture as the authorities seek to use the criminal justice system to clamp down on political opponents, human rights defenders and journalists and as a weapon to attack lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people, Amnesty International said in a new report.

“It’s time to put an end to such blatant violations of human rights,” says Godfrey Byaruhanga, Amnesty International’s central Africa researcher who has recently returned from the country.

“The government needs to make it clear to security forces that human rights violations will not be tolerated – that the perpetrators will be brought to justice and reparations paid to victims.”

In the report, Amnesty International documents a series of cases where fear, intimidation and imprisonment have been used to clamp down on political opposition to President Paul Biya.

For example the case of Titus Edzoa – the former health minister who quit the government to stand as a presidential candidate on 20 April 1997. Later arrested on charges of corruption he is currently serving a 20-year jail sentence after completing a 15-year prison term.

During a visit to his cell he told Amnesty International: “I’m living in virtual isolation and am frightened people will forget me.”

Human rights defenders and members of their families are harassed and threatened for doing their work and the government fails to offer them protection.

Shootings and inhuman conditions in prison

Over the years dozens of prisoners attempting to escape have been shot, injured or killed by prison guards. Numerous prisoners are held in shackles and many have been detained for more than 20 months with no trial.

Amnesty International delegates visited Yaoundé’s Kondengui and Douala’s New Bell prisons and were appalled by the conditions and ill-treatment. At the time of their latest visit in December 2012, there were more than 7,000 prisoners in the two prisons with a shared capacity of 1,500.

“It’s close to a miracle that people actually survive their stay in prison. I was frightened when I visited. How much worse can it be for the thousands of detainees who are abused and forgotten or ignored by the authorities?” says Byaruhanga.

Inmates in Kondengui prison only eat one meal a day and malnutrition is rife. Prison authorities informed Amnesty International that most of the detainees in one wing are mentally ill and researchers saw male inmates who were completely naked amidst a crowd of fellow prisoners.

Imprisonment and ill-treatment of LGBTI people

Engaging in same-sex relationships is a criminal offence in Cameroon and authorities routinely arrest, detain and torture individuals because of their real or perceived sexual orientation. In fact, these violations have increased since the mid-2000s.

Jean-Claude Roger Mbedé 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 sentence was upheld in December 2012.

LGBTI people in custody are also forced to undergo anal examinations in a mistaken belief by the authorities that the examinations can prove whether or not people are engaging in same-sex relations. “There is no justification whatsoever for this illegal, degrading treatment. It represents a severe breach of medical ethics and has to end immediately,” says Byaruhanga.

Defence lawyers for LGBTI people have recently received death threats against themselves and their children for defending homosexuals.

Amnesty International submitted a comprehensive memorandum on human rights abuses to the Cameroonian government in September 2012 along with recommendations. When delegates visited the country in December 2012, they concluded that human rights violations had continued unabated since their previous visit in August 2010.

“The government is adamant that it enforces the rule of law but has little to show for it on the ground. It has to prove that it means what it claims,” adds Byaruhanga.