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## **Senegal must not curtail freedom of expression and assembly in election run-up**

Senegal must respect freedom of expression and assembly in the run-up to presidential elections, Amnesty International said today as a five-day protest ban began.

The country's authorities have prohibited demonstrations between 26-30 January, with the ban starting one day before a key Constitutional Council decision on the validity of the candidates to stand for presidential election,

The opposition is contesting the right of outgoing President Abdoulaye Wade to stand for a third term in the elections, which are scheduled to take place on 26 February.

"There is no apparent justification for this ban which undermines the right to demonstrate peacefully as enshrined in the Senegalese Constitution," said Salvatore Saguès, Amnesty International's West Africa researcher.

"In this tense pre-election period where lawful political debate should be held freely, the authorities' decision to prohibit public gatherings is all the more worrying."

The constitutionality of President Wade's candidacy has sparked intense legal and political debate in Senegal.

Such rows have spilled over into clashes between protestors and security forces resulting in the death of at least one man and dozens of injuries.

"Senegal is at a crossroads and the potential for destabilisation is huge. It is crucial for the future of the country that February's election is free of human rights violations," said Salvatore Saguès.

In a short report released today, Amnesty International gives an overview of the human rights situation in Senegal ahead of the elections.

It details the country's grim record including attacks on freedom of expression, the persistent use of torture by security forces and the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of violations.

In 2011, journalists and political opponents were harassed and subjected to legal proceedings simply for expressing their political opinions. Several demonstrations were violently repressed.

Amnesty International also found evidence of cases of torture in detention in 2011.

On 29 March the handcuffed body of Aladji Konaté was found on the banks of the Senegal River. He had been arrested several days previously on suspicion of drug trafficking.

Police said that he had jumped in the river in an escape attempt but photos of the body taken by Senegalese press showed marks indicating that he had been tortured.

Konaté's body was buried without an autopsy to identify the cause of his death.

No investigation has been opened into this case in spite of calls made to the authorities by local human rights groups and Konaté's family.

Amnesty International's report also looks at the sudden deterioration of the situation in Casamance - a region in the south of the country which has been wracked by conflict for 30 years.

Late 2011 and early 2012 saw tensions increase between the armed group, which wants independence for the region, and the Senegalese armed forces.

"Once the Presidential election is over, the new authorities must, as a matter of urgency, address the persistent impunity that security forces have been enjoying for so long in Senegal," said Salvatore Saguès.

"Perpetrators of human rights violations must be brought to justice and the credibility of the judiciary and rule of law must be upheld."