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Senegal urged to stop clampdown on dissent as protesters shot dead

Senegal's security forces must stop their violent clampdown on dissent, Amnesty International said today after two people were killed during protests in the city of Podor.

One young male protester and an elderly female bystander were shot dead by the gendarmerie, who opened fire on a crowd demonstrating against the Constitutional Council decision to uphold President Abdoulaye Wade's right to stand for a third term in next month's election.

"Today's bloodshed marks a dramatic escalation in the violence that has plagued Senegal in the run up to its elections," said Salvatore Saguès, Amnesty International's West Africa researcher.

"As further protests are planned for tomorrow, we call on the authorities to refrain from using live bullets against peaceful protesters".

Mamadou Sy, aged around 20, and Bana Ndiaye, aged around 60, were shot during protests in Podor, some 500 km north of Senegal's capital Dakar.

An eyewitness told Amnesty International: "We were walking peacefully when suddenly security forces dressed in blue and belonging to the gendarmerie fired at the marchers with live bullets. People fell in front of me."

Protests have rocked Senegal since its Constitutional Council ruled on Friday that current President Wade would be allowed to stand for a third term. Today the council rejected an appeal by the opposition to overturn the decision.

Friday's protests led to clashes between demonstrators and security forces in which one policeman was killed.

During the unrest, three journalists were beaten by the police. One was a correspondent for the French news agency Agence France Presse and the others were female journalists working for the Senegalese daily *le Populaire*.

One of the *le Populaire* journalists, Aminatou Ahane, told Amnesty International: "A policeman got out of his car and ran towards us. We shouted to him that we were journalists and we showed our press cards. He grabbed my colleague's hair and slapped her in the face, then threw her to the ground. He also kicked me and threw me to the ground whilst insulting me. A policeman then came to rescue us."

Amnesty International is also concerned by the detention of Alioune Tine, President of the African Rally for the Defence of Human Rights (Raddho) and national coordinator of the Movement June 23 (M23) that campaigns against President Wade's third term.

“Alioune Tine has been in custody since Saturday 28 January and no one has seen him. He needs regular medical treatment and we fear that his detention conditions may endanger his health,” said Salvatore Saguès.

Another activist, singer Daddy Bibson, was abducted by unknown, plainclothed people early Saturday morning, a few hours after the first demonstrations. He was beaten and threatened.

Bibson says the men told him that rap singers could not decide the future of the country, before he was released about 10 hours later.

Bibson is one of the leaders of the M23 and recently published a compilation of songs against President Wade’s candidacy.

“Freedom of expression is under attack in Senegal at precisely the time when open dialogue is critical,” said Salvatore Saguès.

“All of these incidences must be properly investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice.”

"The Senegalese authorities and security forces must avoid using excessive use of force when dealing with protests," said Salvatore Saguès.

“Such incidents may act as a deterrent and intimidate anyone else who may wish to voice legitimate criticism of the authorities in the run up to elections.”