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Gambia: Free activist jailed for life over anti-government T-shirts

An activist serving life imprisonment with hard labour for printing and distributing T-shirts calling for an end to the dictatorship in The Gambia must be freed, Amnesty International said marking its annual Day of Action calling for improved human rights in the country.

Dr Amadou Scattered Janneh, the country's former Minister for Information and Communication, was arrested in June 2011 after printing and distributing T-shirts made by the NGO 'Coalition for Change – The Gambia' (CCG) which featured the slogan "End to Dictatorship Now". He was found guilty of treason in January 2012.

Every year in The Gambia journalists, human rights activists and political opponents are unlawfully arrested, tortured, harassed and threatened making it impossible for them to do their work. The prospect of a fair trial for most people is bleak.

"Dr Janneh is a prisoner of conscience and is emblematic of the horrific human rights situation that prevails in the Gambia today," said Ayodele Ameen, Amnesty International's Gambia campaigner. "President Yahya Jammeh continues to show a zero-tolerance attitude to any form of criticism and ruthlessly persecutes anyone who speaks out."

The blatant disregard for human rights in The Gambia continues as earlier this year President Jammeh gave instructions to the security forces including the Inspector General of Police, to "shoot first and ask questions later" in an attempt to rid the country of "armed robbers".

Amnesty International has warned that such a hard-handed crackdown on criminal activity will lead to further human rights violations.

"The police and other security forces have a duty to protect lives and property and uphold the rule of law. They must do so in a professional and responsible manner that promotes and protects human rights of all individuals, including the rights of criminals and alleged criminals," said Ameen.

Amnesty International has documented a wide range of human rights violations in The Gambia including enforced disappearances that are yet to be resolved and unlawful killings by security forces who have not been identified and brought to justice.

"The dire human rights situation in The Gambia and the restriction on freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly makes President Jammeh's self-proclaimed 'freedom day' laughable," said Ameen.

"The Gambia must stop making a mockery of its international and regional human rights obligations and ensure the human rights of all people in the country are respected, protected and fulfilled"

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Notes to Editors

- For the past three years, Amnesty International has raised human rights concerns in The Gambia with a worldwide 'Gambia Day of Action'. It follows Gambian President Yahya Jammeh's 'Freedom Day' on July 22 which he uses to celebrate the day he took power during a military coup in 1994.
- This year Amnesty International sections and partners in 11 countries in Africa, Europe and North America are participating in the Gambia Day of Action. They are organizing a combination of press

conferences, lobbying meetings and demonstrations to highlight ongoing human rights violations in The Gambia and to call for the release of Dr Janneh.

· For more information on President Jammeh's "shoot first" orders please see: Gambian Security Forces Must Respect Human Rights in Addressing Crime (AFR 27/003/2012).