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Gambia: Hundreds disappeared, killed and tortured

Gambia must act to improve the deteriorating human rights situation across the country, Amnesty International said in a campaign document released today.

Climate of Fear Continues: Enforced disappearances, killings and torture in Gambia details how cases of enforced disappearances are yet to be resolved after several years, those involved in unlawful killings have not been identified and brought to justice, and torture is still widely used by the security forces.

“President Jammeh marks July 22 each year as ‘Freedom Day’ and yet Gambia is ruled with an iron fist by a government that ruthlessly quashes all forms of dissent,” said Tawanda Hondora, Amnesty International’s deputy Africa director.

“Instead of celebrating ‘Freedom Day’, the Gambian authorities must act to end human rights abuses and the culture of fear.”

On Tuesday three journalists and opposition party members living overseas, including former President of the Gambia Press Union Ndey Tapha Sosseh, were charged in absentia with treason in connection with the distribution of t-shirts bearing the logo ‘End to Dictatorship in the Gambia’. Four others were previously arrested in June and remain in custody in Gambia where treason carries the death penalty.

“These are prisoners of conscience who must be released immediately. President Jammeh must stop these acts of persecution,” said Tawanda Hondora.

Most victims of enforced disappearances in Gambia are journalists, opposition party members or security force personnel. Investigations by the authorities rarely take place and perpetrators are not brought to justice.

Extrajudicial executions have been routinely carried out in Gambia especially against members of the security forces who oppose the government. Amnesty International has also documented cases in which students, journalists and foreign nationals have been killed by security personnel.

One human rights defender in Gambia told Amnesty International:

“They [unlawful killings] are seen as quickly getting rid of coup plotters and other perceived enemies, especially people whom the President feels have turned against him.”

Torture is also regularly used in Gambia to force confessions and to punish detainees. Significant evidence has emerged in trials in recent years suggesting that people were tortured to extract confessions, raising concerns about the admissibility of the evidence.

“Gambia’s government must immediately end incommunicado detention and enforced disappearances, and investigate cases of extrajudicial executions,” said Tawanda Hondora.

“Any person believed to have engaged in these illegal activities must face justice in fair trials.”