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Chad: Judicial harassment of political opponents and journalists must stop

The Chadian government must stop using the judiciary to harass political opponents Amnesty International said today, after three trade unionists and a journalist received heavy suspended prison sentences and fines for initiating and publishing a petition.

Michel Barka, Younous Mahadjir and François Djondang, all leading members of the Union of Chad Trade Unions (Union des syndicats du Tchad, UST), one of the biggest trade unions in the country, yesterday received 18-month suspended prison sentences and were each fined CFA 1 million (US\$2,000).

Jean-Claude Nekim, journalist and director of publication for the bi-weekly newspaper N'Djamena Bi-Hebdo was also given a 12-month suspended prison sentence and fined CFA 1 million (US\$2,000). The newspaper has also been banned for three months.

The four men were found guilty of "incitement to racial hatred" and "defamation" in relation to the UST's petition published earlier this month. Jean-Claude Nekim was charged after N'Djamena Bi-Hebdo printed extracts from the petition.

"The Chadian government must stop using the judiciary as a tool to silence dissent by harassing trade unionists, journalists and other political opponents," said Christian Mukosa, Amnesty International's Chad researcher.

"Journalists, trade unionists and human rights activists must be allowed to carry out their work without fear of persecution."

On 3 September, Michel Barka, Younous Mahadjir and François Djondang, respectively president, vice-president and Secretary General of the UST were telephoned by security and judiciary officials in relation to the petition dated 1 September.

Among other things the petition denounced the mismanagement of public funds and the corruption of some local authorities.

The men were first questioned by the police and prosecutor on 10 September.

All were charged with "incitement of racial hatred". François Djondang and Jean-Claude Nekim were both charged with "defamation".

Their sentences were handed out yesterday morning by the N'Djamena First Instance Tribunal in the capital city of N'Djamena.

During the hearing Mbailao Gustave, who works at the Ministry of Agriculture and is a member of the

UST laughed while the judge was reading out his statement. He was then arrested, sentenced to three months in prison and fined CFA 100,000 (US\$200)

Other recent cases of the judiciary being used to harass political opponents include that of opposition MP Gali Ngote Gatta of United Democratic Forces (Union des Forces Démocratiques) party.

He was arrested and sentenced to a year in prison in March 2012 for attempted corruption and poaching (game meat was allegedly found in his car) by the Tribunal of first instance of Sahr in southern Chad.

Gali Ngote Gatta was arrested on 4 March, judged and sentenced three days later despite his parliamentary immunity not being lifted. There was a lack of respect for legal procedures and the haste with which the hearings were conducted was suspicious.

First detained in Sahr prison Gali Gote Gatta was later moved to Moundou prison following his appeal against the decision of the Sahr tribunal.

He later appealed against this decision at the Moundou court of appeal. He won the case and was released.

Judge Emmanuel Dekeumbé of the Moundou Court of Appeal, who refused to condemn Gatta and who denounced the matter was then dismissed by the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) which is presided over by the president of Chad.

The president of Chad took out an ordinance in July 2012 confirming the SJC's decision.