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Cameroon urged to release men jailed for alleged homosexuality

The Cameroonian authorities must immediately release two men who have been sentenced to five years in prison by a court in Yaounde for homosexual acts, Amnesty International said today.

A third man was sentenced without being present after jumping bail. The men were arrested in July after police alleged they were caught in a sexual act in a car.

“The Yaounde court must overturn this shocking sentence, which punishes these three men solely on the basis of their perceived sexual orientation,” said Erwin van der Borgh, Amnesty International’s director for Africa.

“People accused of such crimes in Cameroon often face abuse and violence from other detainees or prison officers in detention. The two men must be released immediately and the Cameroonian authorities must repeal the country’s discriminatory anti-homosexuality laws,” he added.

In addition to the five-year prison sentence, the maximum sentence for homosexual acts in Cameroon, the men, only known as Francky, Jonas and Hilaire, were each fined 200,000 CFA francs (\$400). Their lawyer has appealed against the sentence.

Amnesty International considers the two men to be prisoners of conscience who are being punished solely because of their perceived sexual orientation.

Homosexuality is illegal in Cameroon and the country has recently seen a wave of anti-gay persecution.

At least ten individuals in Yaounde and Douala have been arrested under the discriminatory anti-gay laws since March this year. One man, Jean-Claude Roger Mbede, was convicted and sentenced to three years’ imprisonment on 28 April 2011. At least six others, arrested in July and August 2011, remain in custody, while three men were arrested and then released.

“The use of criminal law to punish private sexual activity between consenting adults goes directly against international human rights laws that Cameroon has signed and ratified.

“The government must take steps to end detentions, arrests and harassment of individuals on the grounds of their perceived or real sexual identity,” said Erwin van der Borgh.