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Gambia: End arbitrary detentions and torture on “Freedom Day”

Amnesty International is calling on the Gambian government to end its widespread use of arbitrary detentions and torture as activists worldwide stage protests against the authorities' appalling human rights record on 22 July, the country's national holiday known as “Freedom Day”.

“The Gambia is a torture state, where the authorities commit widespread human rights violations with total impunity,” said Etelle Higonnet, West Africa Researcher for Amnesty International. “Last week's sentencing to death of eight men in a mockery of a trial for supposed attempts to overthrow the government is a testament to the level of human rights abuse being carried out in the country today.”

“It is a shameful travesty that, in country where freedom remains an illusion for most people, the President names the national holiday Freedom Day.”

Since gaining power through a coup in 1994, President Yahya Jammeh's government has cracked down on political freedom, subjecting Gambians to unlawful arrest, torture, incommunicado detention, unfair trials, rape, disappearance, and extra-judicial executions.

The eight men sentenced to death last week are the only people to have been tried out of hundreds arrested in November 2009 and March 2010, accused of treason or attempts to destabilise the government.

Activists in 19 cities worldwide are taking part in protests, lobbying, and press conferences on 22 July.

In (insert city name), protests will take the form of (insert details) and can be contacted for further information:

Date:
Time:
Location:
Organisers:
Activity:

Events are also taking place in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Togo, the UK and USA. (delete as appropriate)

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GAMBIA'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD:

Arbitrary detentions

Gambia's human rights situation deteriorated after 1994, when Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh came to power and banned all political parties or political activities. Since March 2006, when President Jammeh claimed to have uncovered an attempted coup plot, the situation has gotten steadily worse.

"Members of the President's own personal protection guard – who are under his direct control – carry out the most egregious abuses" explained Etelle Higonnet, "as do certain units in the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) often referred to as green boys, ninjas, or drug boys. However, the army and police also commit serious human rights violations."

The security services routinely detain people without charge (during which time they are often tortured or ill-treated), or unlawfully imprison them after unfair trials. Individuals are known to have disappeared, died in custody, or died shortly after release – and unconfirmed allegations of additional deaths have been impossible to corroborate due to the government's refusal to provide any information on their cases.

Prison conditions

Conditions in Gambian prisons, especially in Mile 2 Central Prison and other secret detention centres, military barracks, secret quarters in police stations, police stations in remote areas, and warehouses are appalling. They amount to a violation of the right not to be subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment.

Journalists at serious risk

Freedom of expression is severely limited: journalists are arbitrarily arrested if suspected of leaking critical information or writing stories unfavourable to the authorities. Newspapers have been closed down or had their websites hacked into. Journalists and members of the opposition are harassed, threatened, and unlawfully killed.

Two cases involving Gambian journalists have been brought to the attention of the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice since 2006. One case concerns *Daily Observer* journalist Chief Ebrima Manneh – a victim of enforced disappearance for three years despite the Court's ruling that he be released and damages be paid to his family.

In another case, former editor of *The Independent* newspaper Musa Saidykhon alleges he was tortured by the NIA in 2006. Moreover, the 2004 murder of Deydra Hydara, former editor of *The Point* newspaper, who was allegedly killed by government operatives, has never been solved. Since 1994, at least 27 journalists have left The Gambia in fear for their lives.

President Yahya Jammeh has also expelled the Unicef envoy, threatened to kill human rights defenders, warned that he will cut off the heads of all gays in Gambia, and announced that he will start executing those sentenced to death in order to counter rising crime.

Witch hunts

In March 2009, a state-sponsored witch-hunt led to approximately 1,000 people being snatched from their villages and taken to secret detention centres by "witch hunters." Amnesty International reported that after being kidnapped, they were forced to drink hallucinogenic concoctions in secret detention centres, and tortured to confess to witchcraft. The liquid they were forced to drink appeared to lead to kidney problems and to at least six deaths from kidney failure. A well-known opposition leader, Halifa Sallah, criticised the government's 'witchcraft' accusations in the main opposition newspaper in Gambia. He was detained, charged with treason and held in Mile 2 Central Prison. After significant outside pressure, all charges were dropped and he was released.

Migrants at risk

Migrants and visitors are also subject to unlawful arrests, torture and ill-treatment by security forces. In July 2005 a group of 50 foreigners, including 44 Ghanaians, was reportedly killed by members of the Gambia security forces. A report carried out jointly by ECOWAS and the UN determined that rogue security forces were responsible. So far, the Gambian government has not taken any steps to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Action

Amnesty International encourages all members of civil society in Africa to join together and call on The Gambia to:

Stop human rights violations and comply with obligations under the African Charter with regard to the right to liberty, freedom from torture, right to fair trial, freedom of expression and of association;

Take immediate measures to improve the human rights situation in the Gambia;

End incommunicado detention and enforced disappearances, and ensure that security personnel who engage in these practices are brought to justice in fair trials;

Investigate all allegations of torture and extrajudicial executions;

Grant access to all prisoners;

End the harassment and intimidation of independent media institutions;

Stop politically motivated trials of people peacefully exercising their freedom of expression, association and assembly;

Establish an independent and international commission of inquiry to investigate the whereabouts and fate of victims of enforced disappearance and ensure that those responsible for these human rights violations are brought to justice in fair trials;

Establish an independent and international commission of inquiry to investigate the poisoning and killing of people suspected of being witches, and ensure that those responsible for these human rights violations are brought to justice in fair trials;

Establish an adequately resourced independent human rights commission;

Publicly acknowledge the importance and valuable work undertaken by human rights defenders;

Ensure the rule of law and comply with court decisions, including determinations made by the ECOWAS court.

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