

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Chad : Freedom of expression under threat

Amnesty International today called on the Chadian Government to immediately and unconditionally release four journalists who have been sentenced to prison terms for exercising their right to freedom of expression and for practising their profession.

“The freedom of the press must be respected. All journalists in Chad must be guaranteed their rights and be able to do their work without fear of intimidation, arrest, prosecution or imprisonment,” said Amnesty International.

Amnesty International condemned the imprisonment of Samory Ngaradoubmé, Garondé Djarma, Michael Didama and Sy Koumbo Singa Gali, who have expressed their views about the government or revealed human rights violations by the Chadian authorities.

Sy Koumbo Singa Gali, Samory Ngaradoubmé, and Garondé Djarma, are respectively director, editorial coordinator and freelance writer for the private newspaper *L'Observateur*. Samory Ngaradoubmé was sentenced to three months' imprisonment and fined 100,000 CFA francs (about US\$ 176) for publishing an open letter regarding the arrests of members of the Kreda ethnic group addressed to President Idriss Déby. Garondé Djarma was sentenced to three years' imprisonment and fined one million CFA francs (about US\$ 1,764) for criticising the constitutional amendment allowing the President to stand for a third term. Sy Koumbo Singa Gali was prosecuted for defamation after publishing an interview of Garondé Djarma. On 15 August 2005, both journalists were sentenced to one year in jail and fined 200,000 CFA francs (about US\$ 350) for defamation and incitement to hatred. Garondé Djarma is condemned to serve a 4-year jail term.

On 8 August 2005, Michael Didama, director of the private newspaper *Le Temps*, was sentenced to six months' imprisonment and fined 200,000 CFA francs (about US\$ 350) by the trial court (*Tribunal de Première Instance*), which found him guilty of defamation and incitement to hatred. The verdict relates to articles published by *Le Temps* about an active armed political group operating in eastern Chad, and on an alleged massacre by government forces of at least twenty people in the region.

Amnesty International considers Samory Ngaradoubmé, Garondé Djarma, Michael Didama and Sy Koumbo Singa Gali to be prisoners of conscience and demands their immediate and unconditional release, and asks for the charges against them to be dropped.

The arrest, prosecution, sentencing and imprisonment of these four journalists contravenes the Chadian Constitution and Chadian press law (Articles 1 and 2), as well as Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds,

regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.” (Article 19.2), and Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, both of which Chad is a party to.

Background

The arrest and imprisonment of the journalists mentioned above is the latest in a series of actions taken by the authorities to muzzle critical media in Chad.

In February 2004, Tchanguis Vatankhah, director of a private local radio station, Radio Brakos, in Moissala, southern Chad, was summoned for questioning at Moissala police station where he was reportedly severely beaten. This followed the broadcast of an interview with the leader of the opposition National Union for Development and Renewal Party. He was released without charge two days later.

In May 2004, another private radio station, FM Liberté, already suspended in 2003, was threatened with closure after political activists on air called for a demonstration against the constitutional amendment allowing President Déby to stand again for the presidential election.