

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 17/008/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 191
25 October 2002

Cameroon: Human rights defender and political activists arrested and held in prison

Amnesty International is urging the Cameroonian authorities to immediately release Albert Mukong, a former executive director of the Human Rights Defence Group (HRDG) and a reputable human rights defender, who was arrested on 28 September by the *gendarmérie* at Ayukaba, in South West Province. He has since been held at Mamfe *Gendarmerie* Station.

Amnesty International considers Albert Mukong to be a prisoner of conscience. "Albert Mukong is being held solely for speaking out about the right to self-determination of the Anglophone provinces and for acting as an adviser to the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), which campaigns for self-determination for the English-speaking minority in Cameroon," the organization said.

"His arrest is further testimony of Cameroon's clear lack of respect for international standards protecting human rights defenders," Amnesty International added. Such standards include the Johannesburg Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in Africa of 1998, and the 1998 United Nations *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*.

Pa Ayamba and Nfor N. Nfor, two of the main leaders of SCNC, were arrested together with Albert Mukong. Nfor N. Nfor was subsequently released, apparently because his poor health deteriorated.

Agbor Nfaw Joseph, Enow John Enow, Tabe Daniel Agbor, Tambe Atem Valery and Ojong Samuel Ndip, all members of the SCNC, were arrested on 27 September. They were taken to Mamfe *Gendarmerie* station as well, where they are still being held.

"We fear that these people might have been arrested solely for their peaceful political activities. Other members of SCNC might have also been arrested for the same reasons in other parts of Cameroon over the past weeks. Our organisation urges the Cameroonian authorities to release all the detainees unless they are charged with a recognisable criminal offence", Amnesty International said.

Cameroonian law requires detainees to be referred to a judicial authority to be either charged or released within 72 hours of arrest. No charges have yet been brought against any of the above-mentioned detainees.

"The Cameroonian authorities should respect rights of freedom of association and expression. People exercising these rights must not be arbitrarily detained. They should be presumed innocent as

long as they are not judged, must have prompt access to legal counsel of choice, the right to a fair and public trial by an independent court and the right to appeal against judgement and sentence," Amnesty said.

Background

The SCNC advocates increased autonomy for Cameroon's English-speaking minority and supports independence for the English-speaking North-West and South-West Provinces.

On 1 October 1961, the Anglophone provinces attained independence and joined the Francophone regions in a federal State. In 1972, federal state institutions were replaced by a unitary state in which the French-speaking community is predominant.

Every year, around 1 October, political groups throughout the English-speaking Southwest and Northwest provinces call for demonstrations to protest against what they claim is marginalisation in national politics and to demand greater political rights.

The authorities attributed armed attacks in March 1997 in North West province to the SCNC and the affiliated Southern Cameroon Youth League (SCYL). Ten people, including three gendarmes, died during these attacks. At least ten people arrested in connection with the attacks died as a result of torture and ill-treatment at the time of their arrest or subsequent lack of medical care in detention.

In October 1999, 36 alleged SCNC supporters were convicted, after an unfair and politically-motivated trial before a military tribunal in the capital, Yaoundé, of offences relating to the attacks in North-West Province. Three were sentenced to life imprisonment and the others to prison terms of up to 20 years. Eighteen remain imprisoned at the Kondengui Central Prison in Yaoundé.

Political detainees and criminal suspects in Cameroon are routinely tortured or ill-treated. The conditions of detention in police stations, *gendarmerie* detention centres and prisons are extremely harsh. Severe overcrowding, poor hygiene and ventilation, inadequate food and medical care results in a high mortality rate amongst detainees.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>