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Equatorial Guinea: Political prisoners condemned to 'slow execution'

Eleven political prisoners sentenced to death in Equatorial Guinea on 1 June have in reality been condemned to a slow death by appalling prison conditions and near starvation, Amnesty International said today.

"They are being kept in atrocious conditions since being sentenced to death. They are not allowed to speak to anyone and can only leave their cells one hour a day. They are in serious danger of dehydration and starvation as they are not allowed to receive food from their family and the prison gives them very little food." the organization said.

"If nothing is done immediately to improve their condition many could die without even needing to execute them."

The 11 political prisoners were sentenced to death in Malabo, capital of Equatorial Guinea, after a summary and unfair military trial in May at which Amnesty International observers were present. On the day of their sentence, a firing squad was already waiting to shoot them on the beach, near the prison where they are detained, and their graves were made ready. At the very last minute, the President suspended the executions.

A total of more than 110 people were on trial accused of involvement in the 21 January 1998 attacks on military barracks on Bioko Island which led to the death of three soldiers and several civilians. Beside 15 death sentences (including four in absentia), the military court sentenced some 70 to prison terms ranging from 6 to 26 years. All were sentenced on the basis of confessions extracted under torture.

Many of defendants, predominantly members of the Bubi ethnic group on Bioko Island, seemed to have been detained solely because of their ethnic origin.

Several detainees, among the people not sentenced to death, are also suffering from harsh prison conditions. Two of them have already been carried out to the hospital, including Martin Puye (aged 58) and one of the leaders of the *Movimiento para la Auto-determinación de la Isla de Bioko* (MAIB), Movement of the Self-determination of Bioko Island, who is suffering from gastritis. A young woman, Milagrosa Cheba was also sent to hospital because she is suffering from malaria. The prison authorities were reportedly reluctant to allow them to be cured in hospital and the detainees who are ill have to pay for their treatment.

Many of these prisoners are very weak after being severely tortured during their pre-trial detention. At least six detainees died in detention as a result of torture. During the trial in May, the Amnesty International delegation was able to see obvious marks of torture on the defendants, including fractured feet and hands.

"After surviving severe torture, their lives are now threatened again by their appalling prison conditions," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is repeating its appeal for the commutation of all death sentences and is calling on the authorities to make immediate and substantial improvements to the conditions under which all the prisoners are being held. They should give enough food and water to all the detainees and allow those who need it to receive professional medical treatment.

Amnesty International is also urging the government to grant the prisoners access to an international humanitarian organization such as the International Committee for the Red Cross.

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