

PUBLIC

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UA 72/09 Fear of torture or other ill-treatment/ possible unfair trial

GAMBIA Halifa Sallah (m)

Halifa Sallah was arrested on 8 March at his home in Serrekunda, a suburb of the capital Banjul, and taken to Serrekunda police station by five plain clothed policemen. He is believed to have been arrested for his articles criticising the use of witch-doctors by the Gambian government. Amnesty International is concerned that he is at risk of being tortured or ill treated and being the victim of an unfair trial.

Halifa Sallah was moved to Yundung police station in a neighbouring suburb on the 9 March. The next day he was moved to Banjul police station. He was charged with sedition and spying by the Brikama magisterial court on 11 March and sent to the remand section of Mile II, the Central Prison in the Gambia. His next court date is set for 25 March.

Since January, Halifa Sallah has been writing articles for *Foroyya* the main opposition newspaper, of which he is also a board member, about the activities of witch-doctors from Mali and other West African states. The witch doctors have reportedly been invited to Gambia to identify witches in a number of villages in the country.

The witch-doctors were invited soon after the death of President Jammeh's aunt as the president reportedly believes that witchcraft was used in her death. Articles by Halifa Sallah and other *Foroyya* reporters claim that witch-doctors accompanied by Gambian state guards and "the green boys", the president's personal protection officers, identified people in villages of Foni Kansala district, an area near to the President's farm of Kanilai, as witches. Those suspected of being witches were attacked, arrested, and detained in Kanilai and forced to drink concoctions that were supposed to determine whether they were witches. Those accused would then be forced to confess to being a witch. In some cases, they were also severely beaten almost to the point of death.

Following Halifa's arrest on 8 March several hundred people are reported to have been arrested and unlawfully detained by members of the presidential guard and brought to Kanilai. A woman from Makumbaya is known to have died of kidney failure shortly after being released from the captivity of witch doctors. Halifa Sallah had previously written to the National Security Council in Gambia to demand that a stop be put to these actions, describing them as "gross violations of human rights and infringements on the privacy of Gambians".

Halifa Sallah is former member of the Pan African parliament and minority leaders of the National assembly. He is secretary general of the People's Democratic Organization of Independence and Socialism and the coordinator of the National Alliance for Democracy and Development. He stood as a presidential candidate in 2006.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In Gambia journalists and members of the opposition are considered enemies of the government. They are routinely harassed, threatened, receive death threats, unlawfully arrested, detained, disappeared, are the victims of an unfair trial and tortured.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing concern at the safety of Halifa Sallah, who is at risk of being tortured or ill treated;
- questioning the charges that he faces and expressing concern that he could be the victim of an unfair trial;
- urging the authorities to give Halifa Sallah regular access to his family and legal counsel of his own choosing.

APPEALS TO:

President and Minister of Defence

Captain (retd.) Alhaji Yahya A. J. J. Jammeh

Office of the President

State House, Banjul

Republic of the Gambia

Fax: + 220 4227 034

Salutation: Your Excellency

Attorney General and Secretary of State for Justice

Mrs Marie Saine Firdaus

Department of State for Justice

Marina Parade, Banjul, Republic of the Gambia

Fax: +220 4225 352

Salutation: Dear Secretary of State

Secretary of State for the Interior

Mr Ousman Sonko

Office of the President

State House, Banjul, Republic of the Gambia

Fax: +220 4223 718

Salutation: Dear Secretary of State

COPIES TO:

European Commission In The Gambia

Ms. Bernadette Lunde

Secretary to the Chargé d'Affaires

Delegation Of The European Commission In The Gambia

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British High Commission

Mr Philip Sinkinson

British High Commission

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American Embassy

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PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 23 April 2009.