

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 27/003/2001

UA 267/01

Fear of ill-treatment/prisoner of conscience/human rights defender

22 October 2001

GAMBIALamine Sillah, Secretary General, Amnesty International Gambia

The Secretary General of Amnesty International's Gambia section, Lamine Sillah, was arrested today. He is now believed to be held at the headquarters of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) in the capital, Banjul, where prisoners are regularly beaten and tortured while held incommunicado.

Lamine Sillah was arrested by four NIA officers at Amnesty International's offices. No reason was given for the arrest and Lamine Sillah was simply told that he was required to go with the officers and answer some questions.

Although no official reason has been given for his arrest, it is believed to be linked to an interview he gave on 21 October to the BBC World Service's *Focus on Africa* program. He reportedly mentioned a violent incident which took place after the results of the 18 October presidential election were announced, and the need for restraint by the security forces. He also took part in a talk show on reconciliation broadcast on a national radio station that day. None of the three other panelists, all prominent members of civil society, have been arrested or called in for questioning.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A bloodless military coup brought the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC), led by Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh, to power in July 1994. Decrees passed soon afterwards undermined fundamental freedoms and removed human rights safeguards: political activities were banned, journalists were harassed or expelled from the country and the National Intelligence Agency was given wide-ranging powers. The AFPRC promised a return to civilian rule, and after some delays, presidential elections took place in September 1996. Lieutenant (now Captain) Jammeh was elected president. A new Constitution came into force in 1997 but most restrictive decrees remain in force.

Legislation restricting political activities was lifted in July 2001. However, President Jammeh immediately warned against "disturbing the peace of the stability of the nation", saying that anyone who did so "would be buried six feet deep".

President Jammeh was re-elected on 18 October in the first round of presidential elections. He won over 50 per cent of the votes cast, with his main rival gaining less than 33 percent. The results have not been contested by opposition parties. The electoral campaign, however, was marred by violence between rival supporters, as well as targeted attacks on opposition leaders, apparently by supporters of President Jammeh. Two people were shot and killed by police as rallies were broken up.

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

- asking why Lamine Sillah, Secretary General of Amnesty International's Gambian Section, has been arrested;
- stating that Amnesty International believes that Lamine Sillah is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely because of his human rights work, and calling for him to be released immediately and unconditionally;

- calling for Lamine Sillah to be protected from ill-treatment while he remains in custody, and to be guaranteed access to his family, lawyers, humanitarian and human rights organizations.

APPEALS TO:

President and Minister of Defence

Captain (retd.) Yahya A. J. J. Jammeh
Office of the President
State House, Banjul
Gambia

Telegrams: President Jammeh, Banjul, Gambia

Faxes: + 220 227034

Salutation: Dear President

Head of the National Intelligence Agency

Mr Kebba Ceesay
NIA Headquarters
Banjul, Gambia

Fax: + 220 22 55 62

Salutation: Dear Mr Ceesay

Minister of Interior

Honourable Ousman Badjie
Ministry of Interior
71 Dobson Street, Banjul
Gambia

Telegrams: Interior Minister, Banjul, Gambia

Faxes: + 220 201320

Salutation: Dear Minister

Minister of Justice and Attorney-General

Honourable Joseph Joof
Ministry of Justice
Marina Parade, Banjul
Gambia

Telegrams: Justice Minister, Banjul, Gambia

Faxes: + 220 225352

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Minister of External Affairs

Babucar Blaise Jagne
Ministry of External Affairs
4 Marina Parade, Banjul
Gambia

Fax: + 220 228 060

and to diplomatic representatives of Gambia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 19 November 2001.