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Guinea: Security forces should respect right to freedom of expression and association

"Arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment of peaceful political opponents are unacceptable and must be stopped", Amnesty International urged today in the run-up to the constitutional referendum in Guinea on 11 November. "The government must ensure that the rights to freedom of expression and association are fully respected by its security forces."

As the constitutional referendum approaches, Amnesty International is increasingly concerned about the excessive use of force and other human rights violations by the Guinean security forces. According to reports, on 3 November 2001 members of the security forces briefly detained leaders of political opposition parties and used batons and tear-gas against civilians to prevent peaceful demonstrations in Conakry, the capital. Demonstrators were also reportedly arbitrarily arrested and beaten in the northeastern town of Kankan on 30 October 2001. Amnesty International fears that the human rights situation is likely to deteriorate further quickly unless urgent preventative measures are taken, both before the referendum and over the next few weeks.

The Guinean security forces routinely use violence, including torture, and other forms of intimidation to repress members of the political opposition. The December 1998 presidential election, in which President Lansana Conté was re-elected, was marred by violence on the part of the security forces. Opposition parties criticized the vote as unfair and accused the government of rigging the election. Opposition members of parliament, local government councillors and scores of other individuals, including women and young girls, were arrested. Many of them were tortured in detention, including some women and young girls

being raped. Some of those arrested were detained without charge for months or given long prison sentences after unfair trials. The allegations of human rights violations by the security forces have not been formally investigated by the authorities and no one has been brought to justice for these crimes. The security forces continue to act with impunity.

"The long-standing pattern of human rights violations by the Guinean security forces is clear. The government of Guinea should immediately and publicly instruct its forces to end arbitrary arrests and violence against peaceful demonstrators. The basic rights to freedom of expression and association must be fully respected", Amnesty International urged.

Amnesty International is also calling on donor governments and intergovernmental organizations such as the European Union (EU) to raise human rights concerns with President Conté and his government. The United States (US) government, the EU and others have already voiced concerns about the referendum which, if passed, would extend President Conté's current term in office and allow him to stand as a candidate for a third term. A coalition of Guinean opposition parties has campaigned against the referendum for months and is calling for a boycott of the referendum by voters.

Background information

President Conté seized power in 1984 following a military coup. The appalling human rights record of his government and the security forces is well documented by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations. Most recently, the government has resumed judicial executions after more than 15 years. Seven people have been executed since February 2001; twenty-two others have been sentenced to death during 2001 and are now awaiting execution. Before February 2001, no executions were known to have taken place since 1984. Amnesty

International is calling on President ContJ to commute all existing death sentences and to abolish the death penalty in practice and in law.

Opposition leader and former prisoner of conscience Alpha CondJ is still prevented from resuming his activities as a member of the National Assembly. Amnesty International believes that this constitutes a further violation of his right to freedom of expression. Despite his release from detention in May 2001, the government has stated that his "criminal record" bars him from participating in political life. Alpha CondJ was imprisoned for almost two and a half years following the December 1998 presidential election, in which he was a candidate.

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