

143/96

AI INDEX: AFR 32/13/96
6 AUGUST 1996

KENYA: CHARGES AGAINST MEMBERS OF HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATION
SHOULD BE DROPPED

The purely political charges against 21 members of a human rights organization -- who were finally given bail today after being held for 19 days in harsh prison conditions -- should be dropped, Amnesty International said today.

All 21 members of the Release Political Prisoners (RPP) group were arrested in Nairobi, Kenya, on Friday 19 July, on charges of sedition and holding an illegal meeting. They were initially refused bail despite the fact that both charges are bailable under Kenyan law.

"The laws on sedition are yet again being used to suppress dissenting voices. This has serious implications in the run up to the general election due in 1997," Amnesty International said. "These people are prisoners of conscience and should never have been arrested in the first place."

Human rights activists in Kenya believe the RPP is being targeted for its human rights activities. In the past few months the RPP has continued to express concern at the murder of their General Secretary, Karimi Nduthu, and has raised questions about the apparent lack of progress in the police investigation.

The bail application was not opposed by the prosecution when the case came to court this morning. Bail has been set at Kenya shillings 20,000 each (approximately £240). They were represented in court by senior Kenyan lawyers and supported by lawyers from a number of legal and human rights organizations including: the Kenya branch of the International Commission of Jurists, Federation of Independent Women Lawyers (FIDA)-Kenya, the Kenya Human Rights Commission and Kituo Cha Sheria, a legal aid centre. The trial is set to begin on 19 August.

The members of the RPP had been trying to attend a three-day cultural meeting organized in memory of their General Secretary, Karimi Nduthu, who was murdered in suspicious circumstances on 24 March. After riot police refused them entry on 18 July to the venue of the meeting, they returned the next day to try to speak to the Director. When police again prevented their entry and attempted to arrest individual members of the group, the 21 linked arms and refused to separate. According to reports, they were then violently arrested by the police.
ENDS\