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Liberia: As UN sanctions approach, repression of critics escalates

Liberian security officers responsible for torture and ill-treatment of students should be immediately investigated and brought to justice, said Amnesty International today.

*Dozens of university students were beaten by the security forces in Monrovia yesterday solely for peacefully protesting against the continued detention of four independent journalists of *The News*, arrested one month ago. The journalists were charged with espionage after publishing an article criticising the government's spending on spare parts for helicopters while delaying months of wages for civil servants. Amnesty International is calling for their immediate and unconditional release as prisoners of conscience.*

On 21 March, the Special Operation Division (SOD), a unit of the security forces often implicated in human rights violations, including torture, entered the university campus to stop a student rally expressing solidarity with the detained journalists and aimed at raising funds for their defence. They moved into the campus on the request of the university authorities which had reportedly not authorized the gathering.

The SOD indiscriminately whipped and beat students and professors, both male and female injuring many. Some female students were reportedly humiliated by being stripped naked. A journalist was reportedly beaten by security officers who tried to seize his camera. At least twenty students were arrested by the SOD and taken to the National Police Headquarters. They were subsequently released without charge.

Amnesty International is concerned that some students including women were seen being taken away by the Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU), an elite unit which has been frequently implicated in political killings and cases of torture. Four students were reportedly briefly arrested, beaten and only released thanks to the intervention of a priest, while being taken to a local ATU base. However, Amnesty International fears that some others might still be held by the ATU which often held people incommunicado.

"We call on the Liberian authorities to make sure that no student is held incommunicado or tortured and to immediately release any student who is still arbitrarily detained, unless there is credible evidence of recognizably criminal offence," the human rights organization added.

Background

Internal repression in Liberia has escalated since July 2000, when opposition armed forces attacked Lofa County in northern Liberia from the neighbouring Republic of Guinea. Critics of the Liberian government, including students, media, human rights defenders and political opponents, have frequently labelled as "dissidents" by the authorities and have been increasingly been verbally and physically attacked. Students, often critical of the government, have repeatedly come under attack.

On 31 July 2000, the University of Liberia campus was attacked by the security forces and the leadership of the University of Liberia Student Union (ULSU), including Alphonso Nimene, was arrested by the SOD for publicly expressing concern on several issues including fighting in Lofa County and UN accusations that Liberia was involved in the Sierra Leonean conflict. The ULSU leaders were severely beaten while held at the National Police Headquarters in Monrovia. They were released shortly afterwards without charge. Police denied allegations of torture.

Intolerance of criticism was further exacerbated after the publication of a UN report in December 2000 accusing Liberia of providing military support to the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the armed opposition group in Sierra Leone which has been responsible for widespread human rights abuses, and of profiting from the illegal trade in diamonds from Sierra Leone which fuels the war. On 7 March 2001 a UN Resolution introduced a ban on diamond exports from Liberia and travel for senior officials. The ban comes into effect in May 2001, unless Liberia complies with UN Security Council's demands. These include ceasing military support to the RUF, expelling RUF members from Liberia and stopping the import of rough diamonds from Sierra Leone.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>