

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Liberia: Journalist Hassan Bility and two others feared dead as government fails to produce them in court**

Amnesty International expressed fears that Hassan Bility, the editor of the *Analyst* Newspaper and two others may have died as a result of torture in detention. The three were arrested on 24 June 2002 and have been held incommunicado since.

In spite of the government publically admitting their detention, all key state security agencies have denied that the suspects are in their custody. Efforts by the local human rights and legal community to know their whereabouts have been in vain. On Monday 1 July the government failed to produce the living bodies of Hassan Bility and the two others in court.

On 26 July Information Minister Reginald Goodridge admitted publicly in a press conference that Hassan Bility and the two others were in detention. He said that the detainees were accused of running a rebel "LURD terrorist cell" in Monrovia. In spite of these serious allegations the detained have not yet been charged with a recognisable criminal offence. It is against the Liberian constitution and international law to hold prisoners incommunicado and beyond 48 hours without being presented to a court of competent jurisdiction.

On Thursday 27 June the National Human Rights Centre of Liberia, a coalition of human rights organisations, served a writ of habeas corpus against the government of Liberia. On the same day Judge Winston O. Henries ordered the government to produce the living bodies of Hassan Bility and the two others on Monday 1 July. On this day the government lawyers requested more time until Wednesday 3 July to produce Hassan Bility and the two others.

Given the record of the Liberian government with regard to torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of human rights defenders in detention and repeated attacks on Hassan Bility in the past, Amnesty International is "seriously concerned that the failure to produce the bodies of Hassan Bility and the two others could mean that they have been severely tortured or killed".

### **Background**

Hassan Bility has been arrested, questioned and detained twice over the past year. The *Analyst* newspaper, of which he is the editor, has been closed down twice, for writing and publishing articles deemed critical of the government.

On 13 May, Hassan Bility received a telephoned death threat from a colonel in the Liberian National Police. He was told " we know you all who are writing against our Papay (a common name given to the President, Charles Taylor) , and the time is approaching for us to deal with you guys; your writings and opinions are influencing the international community to expose the Papay". The threat came as a result of a speech by human rights lawyer Tiawan Gongloe which was reported in the Analyst newspaper and which was considered threatening to the government and its national security.

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