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Liberia: Hassan Bility released but other human rights activists remain held

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Amnesty International welcomes the release of Hassan Bility, a journalist and human rights activist held incommunicado for almost six months, but questions the Liberian government's continued detention of other human rights activists who have also been held solely because of their legitimate activities in defence of human rights.

"The release of Hassan Bility is a significant step in the right direction," Amnesty International said. "The government of Liberia must go further, however, and release others who are held solely because of their criticism of the government and their condemnation of the persistent violation of the fundamental human rights of the Liberian people."

Hassan Bility was released two days ago by the Liberian government. He was handed over to United States embassy officials in the capital, Monrovia, late on 7 December 2002 and flown out of the country.

Other human rights defenders still in detention include Shiekh K.M. Sackor, who was arrested in July 2002, a month after Hassan Bility, and Aloysius Toe, who was arrested on 4 November and is now on trial on a trumped-up charge of treason.

Aloysius Toe is Secretary General of the Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders, which comprises 19 human rights organizations. He was arrested after the Coalition launched a week-long campaign to secure the release of Hassan Bility, Shiekh Sackor and others.

The Liberian government is reported to have said that it is willing to hand over other detainees to United States officials.

"The release of those human activists who remain in detention, including Sheikh Sackor and Aloysius Toe, should be immediate and without conditions. It should not be dependent on the intervention by other governments or their removal from the country," Amnesty International said.

Background

Human rights defenders have repeatedly been victims of arbitrary arrest and detention. The government has accused them of spreading false information intended to "tarnish the image" of Liberia within the international community and, more recently, of being members or supporters of the armed opposition Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD).

Hassan Bility, a journalist with *The Analyst* newspaper, was held incommunicado and without charge or trial since his arrest on 24 June 2002. Sheikh Sackor, Executive Director of Humanist Watch, has been held since 25 July 2002. The government has accused them of belonging to the LURD and initially said that they would be tried under military jurisdiction. No charges were, however, brought against them, they had no access to defence lawyers and were not brought before any court, despite several writs of *habeas corpus* submitted on their behalf. Both men were reported to have been tortured while held in incommunicado detention. On 23 October 2002 the Minister of National Defense announced that a military tribunal had convened and concluded that they were "prisoners of war" - a description which had no legal foundation whatsoever. Although the government announced on 28 October that Hassan Bility and Sheikh Sackor were to be released - but under certain conditions which they had to agree to - they remained held. The conditions were not publicly disclosed but those detained were warned that they risked rearrest if they failed to meet them.

The charge of treason against Aloysius Toe is apparently based on a document by the LURD purported to have been found at his home when it was raided by police. The document, which he is alleged to have received by e-mail, is a public statement by the LURD which has been widely diffused, including on the internet, and sent to many individuals, both in Liberia and abroad. No other evidence of the offence of treason has been cited. Receipt of an e-mail *per se* cannot be considered as an act of treason as defined by Article 76 of the 1986 Liberian Constitution.

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