

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

AI index: AFR 44/011/2013
28 June 2013

Nigeria executions: “They almost executed him secretly”

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/nigeria-death-penalty-feature-2013-06-28>

On Tuesday, Ebhos was dragged to the gallows in Benin Prison, Nigeria. He was forced to watch as four men were hanged.

He only escaped execution because, at the last moment, the prison authorities realised that his death sentence, imposed by a military tribunal, required a firing squad. It had not been prepared.

The Nigerian furniture maker had been on death row for 17 years, convicted of armed robbery. His son, Solomon, only learned that his father was about to be put to death when he read a local newspaper report that four men had been hanged.

“The morning after the four executions I knew that my day was on death row,” he told Amnesty International. “The article said there was still one person at risk of execution and I knew it was him. My two eldest sisters went down to the prison to try and find out what was happening.”

Solomon described his sense of despair at the news that his father may be put to death at any point from now on.

[Listen to an interview with Ebhodaghe Solomon.](#)

“My two eldest sisters went down to the prison to see him to get the full information about what was happening. When they came back they said he was sobbing. My sister said that was the second time she saw my father weeping,” he said.

“They had taken him to the gallows and asked him to write a will and told him that they should pass some of the things he had to me, because I’m the only son. They didn’t call us. They didn’t even ask him if there was anyone they could contact. They almost were going to kill him in secret.”

17 years waiting for death

Ebhodaghe Solomon was barely walking when Thankgod Ebhos, was sent to prison accused of armed robbery in 1988.

Ebhos was eventually tried and sentenced to death by a military tribunal in 1995 - some seven years after his arrest. At that time, Nigeria was under military rule. Military tribunals at the time denied defendants the right to appeal.

Amnesty International raised serious concerns about the fairness of military tribunals in Nigeria during that period, which lasted until 1999 when Nigeria returned to civilian rule.

Ebhodaghe Solomon remembers when he first visited his father on death row.

“I finally had the opportunity to see my father four years ago. I was around 21. I braced myself and I was happy to see him in good health, he was doing well,” Solomon said.

He describes how under a new regime of civilian rule, his father hoped he could appeal against his death sentence.

“When we met, he spoke a lot about the family, about his intentions of working, earning money, going abroad. He loves to play music. He learned how to handle musical instruments in the prison. He also loves to read and learned how to paint in prison. He is a very happy spirited person.”

Ebhodaghe Solomon last saw his father four weeks ago.

“Nothing much had changed. He told me that his brothers, my uncles, had been trying to find lawyers to look into the case but every time they did that it would be unsuccessful. Many of the lawyers we had spoken to couldn't help so all we can do is pray that god would bring him out because my dad has changed completely.”

Surprise executions

There are approximately 1,000 individuals on death row across Nigeria; the country has not executed any prisoners since 2006.

But on 16 June, father's day, things took a turn for the worse when President Goodluck Jonathan urged state Governors to sign death warrants for death row prisoners – this, in effect, allows federal prison authorities to proceed with executions of inmates on death row in prisons.

A week later the four inmates held at Benin Prison were dragged to the gallows and hanged.

All still had appeals pending in their cases. Their execution came only hours after a federal High Court had dismissed a lawsuit against three of the execution warrants. Lawyers acting on behalf of the men immediately filed an application for stay of execution. The Edo state Attorney General and the prison authorities ignored the judgement.

“The recent executions were an incredible shock to all of us,” said Lucy Freeman, deputy Africa director at Amnesty International.

“Under Nigerian and international law, executions may not be carried out while any appeals are still pending. By executing the prisoners, Nigeria has demonstrated a gross disregard for the rule of law and respect for the judicial process,” said Ms Freeman.

The relatives of those executed were not informed in advance.

Solomon said his family are distraught, knowing that their father may be executed at any moment.

“I would ask the President why he has decided that my father should have his life taken,” he said.

Amnesty International is calling for an immediate halt on the execution of Thankgod Ebhos and an end to the death penalty in Nigeria.