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## **NIGERIANS DESERVE A BETTER FATE**

**Opinion piece by Pierre Sané,  
Secretary General, Amnesty International**

When Africa threw off the chains of colonialism, Nigeria was looked to as a beacon of hope and progress by all Africans. As a young Senegalese man I shared this enthusiasm. A country of enormous energy and potential, Nigeria seemed destined to lead the people of Africa to a better future.

Thirty years later, this destiny remains unfulfilled. For the people of Africa today, Nigeria is looked at with despair, as successive governments have become locked in a cycle of contempt for human rights. Nigeria has instead been the inspiration for those African leaders who oppose justice and freedom.

Last year was a terrible year for human rights in Nigeria. It culminated with the execution in November of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others, most of them supporters of MOSOP, after grossly unfair trials which prompted an international outcry.

This year has been equally bleak. In June Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, senior wife of Chief Moshood Abiola, the man who won the aborted presidential election in 1993, was murdered, it is assumed, by government agents. Chief Abiola himself is still in prison on politically-motivated charges. Ogoniland, Saro-Wiwa's homeland, is still under siege.

Yet the government pretends that all is well and affects outrage when it is suggested that it is not. When asked about the fate of political prisoners earlier this year, Wadi Nas, the Minister for Special Duties replied, "They are not the first to be detained in this country... why are you interested in them?"

Take Chief Gani Fawehinmi, Nigeria's most renowned human rights lawyer. Here is why the world must take an interest: since his arrest on 30 January 1996, no reasons have ever been given for his detention, although the real reason is clearly his vocal criticism of the government. Incarcerated in Bauchi Prison -- a damp, dilapidated establishment filthy with human excrement, he suffers from acute malaria, diarrhoea and possibly pneumonia. The authorities have failed to bring him to court on two occasions, despite being ordered by the high court to do so. They clearly want to forget about him, perhaps hoping he will quietly die in his cell. For his sake -- and the sake of other human rights defenders in Nigeria -- we can't.

We must also not forget Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti, who is serving a 15-year-sentence for involvement in the alleged 1995 coup plot. His only “offence” was to have faxed the defence submission of one of the military defendants to people outside Nigeria. He is held in solitary confinement in Katsina prison in the far north, where he also suffers constant malarial fevers.

The roll-call of injustice goes on and on -- Frank Kokori, Milton Dabibi, Femi Falana, Olusegun Obasanjo, Shehu Musa Yar’Adua, Chris Anyanwu, Ben Charles Obi, Kunle Ajibade, George Mbah, Shehu Sani, Rebecca Ikpe, Sanusi Mato, all scattered around the country, rotting away in prisons. And not forgetting another 19 Ogoni prisoners, still facing unfair trial and possible execution on the same murder charges as Ken Saro-Wiwa.

In May this year, the Nigerian government announced a number of human rights reforms. A closer look at these “reforms” reveals that in reality they are a sham. For example, the right of appeal promised for those before Civil Disturbances Special Tribunals like the one which tried Ken Saro-Wiwa turns out to be only to another government-appointed special tribunal. The main purpose of these reforms is an attempt to defuse international pressure.

Faced with such evidence, who can take seriously the claims of the military government that it is sincere about human rights? Who can believe in the latest transition to civilian rule when so many innocent people are suffering. So much of what has happened in Nigeria since General Sani Abacha seized power in 1993 is a repetition of events during the previous transition to civilian rule under General Babangida between 1987 and 1993.

The international community has appeared recently in increasing danger of succumbing once again to a paralysing fatalism about Nigeria. Aborted transitions? It will ever be so, some say. Military rule? At least it maintains stability, others argue. Such views could not be more wrong. Each time Nigeria is doomed to repeat its past, the prospects for its long-term stability deteriorate and the possibility of civil war and massive refugee movements increases. It happened in the 1960s; it could happen again. Most of West Africa would be thrown into turmoil. Rwanda, Burundi and Liberia have shown the tragic results of failing to take effective international action before a crisis develops.

It need not be like this. No Nigerian government has ever made a systematic attempt to create a culture of respect for human rights. The latest is no different. This is what the Nigerian government should now embark upon. Neither Nigerians nor the wider international community should settle for anything less.

Amnesty International has put forward a program of reforms, which we believe will create a culture of real respect for human rights in Nigeria. With the firm backing of the international community, if implemented, these reforms could bring an improvement in the day to day life of over 100 million Nigerians. And success in Nigeria could immeasurably enhance the prospects for human rights across the continent as a whole.

Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight colleagues cannot be brought back to life. The best way to respond to the terrible injustice which they, their families, friends and community suffered is for Nigerians to pledge that it will never happen again and then to take the necessary steps to ensure that it does not.

As Dare Babarinsa, a journalist on the Nigerian independent weekly *Tell* magazine, has said, Nigerians deserve a better fate.  
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