

AI INDEX: AFR 44/27/98
1 MAY 1998

PUBLIC STATEMENT

NIGERIA

Reported releases – a smokescreen for six facing execution after secret military trials?

The reported release of more than 120 detainees in Nigeria should not be used a smokescreen to distract attention from the six death penalties passed after grossly unfair and secret military treason trials, according Amnesty International today. The organization is calling on the Nigerian Government not to carry out more political executions.

On 30 April the government confirmed that it had released detainees, but it had made no official statement. Most of the detainees appear to be common law prisoners released because they were over the age of 60 or had served long prison terms. Only five are reported to be prisoners of conscience -- held without charge or trial for months because their papers criticized the government.

They include four journalists. Mohammed Adamu, bureau chief in Abuja for *African Concord* news magazine, and Soji Omotunde, editor, *African Concord*, have been detained since July and October 1997 respectively. Onome Osifo-Whiskey, managing editor, *Tell* news magazine, Babafemi Ojudu, managing editor, *The News* newspaper group and Ogaga Ifowodo, a human rights activist with the Civil Liberties Organisation, a leading human rights group in Nigeria, have all been detained since November 1997.

The government has however continued to detain other journalists and newspaper employees from the same newspapers, and sometimes reports of releases have proved to be false or premature. On 20 and 22 April eight employees of *The News* group were arrested and reportedly beaten, their offices ransacked and computers seized. They were administrative and security staff Mufutau Lateef, Anthony Nwana, Wale Odofin, Samson Adeyemi, James Ayoola and Hassan Turaki, and journalists Rotimi Obasa Yomi Osoba and Austin Uganwa.

The government has been under considerable pressure, including during the recent visit of Pope John Paul II, to fulfil a commitment made by head of state General Sani Abacha in November 1997 to release political detainees. Since then, senior government officials have denied that his words implied any such commitment or that there are any political prisoners in Nigeria. The release of uncharged detainees, while welcome, does not therefore suggest any change of policy with regard to human rights.

Indeed, the head of state and the military government, the Provisional Ruling Council, are currently considering the sentences of the six sentenced to death after the latest unfair treason trial conducted *in camera*. They are Lieutenant-General Oladipo Diya, former Vice-Chairman of the Provisional Ruling Council, and two other senior members of the military government of General Sani Abacha who came to power in a coup in November 1993 -- Major-General Abdulkarim Adisa and Major-General Tajudeen Olanrewaju. Also convicted were armed forces officers, Major Olusegun Fadipe and Lieutenant-Colonel Olu Akinyode, and a civilian, Bola Adebajo, an electrical engineer and associate of General Diya.

They were convicted of plotting a coup after a grossly unfair trial by Special Military Tribunal conducted in secret. Journalists were only allowed to attend the first day of the hearings, before any charges had been brought, and the last day, when the convictions and sentences were announced. There is no right of appeal to a higher court; all convictions and sentences have to be confirmed or disallowed by the Provisional Ruling Council. Executions could therefore be imminent.

The accused were charged in connection with a coup plot which the government announced that it had uncovered in December 1997. Unofficial reports suggest that senior military officers may have devised the coup plot in order to entrap General Diya and other senior officers, mostly from the Yoruba ethnic group. However, the Special Military Tribunal, in its announcement of the sentences, reportedly said that it had not enquired into who had initiated the conspiracy. At the start of the trial, there were 26 defendants; by the end there were 30.

Four defendants, including journalist Niran Malaolu, were sentenced to life imprisonment for "information gathering" and implication in the alleged coup plot. Six defendants were convicted of lesser offences and sentenced to prison terms of between two and 14 years. Fourteen defendants were acquitted.
ENDS.../