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Time to turn over a new page and break with Nigeria's brutal past

The new head of state in Nigeria, Major-General Abdulsalam Abubakar, should break with the country's legacy of repression and give the Nigerian people hope for the future, Amnesty International urged today -- following the death of General Sani Abacha.

"Major-General Abubakar should grasp the opportunity to demonstrate a new commitment to human rights by the military government in Nigeria," the organization said.

"Releasing prisoners of conscience imprisoned for defending the most basic human rights would give a strong message to the Nigerian people and to the international community that this is a government ready to allow the exercise of fundamental freedoms. Africa's most populous nation cannot fulfil its economic and political potential if military governments continue blocking the momentum for reform which has developed in recent years," Amnesty International added.

There are scores of prisoners of conscience held in life-threatening conditions in Nigeria's jails, among them, the winner of the 1993 presidential elections, Moshood Abiola, imprisoned without trial since 1994. Those unfairly convicted of treason in 1995 include former head of state retired General Olusegun Obasanjo and human rights activist Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti. The death in December 1997 of former deputy head of state Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, apparently from harsh conditions and medical neglect, was never investigated.

The authorities have attempted to stop renewed protests at continued military rule. At least 10 people were reportedly shot dead by police in protests in May 1998 in Ibadan.

Dozens of journalists have been detained incommunicado or forced into exile. Journalists from *Tell* news magazine and *The News* media group were particularly targeted for arrest and harassment after they reported that General Abacha was seriously ill in September 1997.

"The new government should not miss the opportunity to make concrete reforms and to commit to a future where dissenting opinions are tolerated. It should demonstrate a new respect for the rule of law by ending government by decrees which remove Constitutional rights and by acceding to the authority of the courts," Amnesty International stated.

Court orders for the release or compensation of victims of political repression have repeatedly been ignored by the military government. On 22 May 1998, 15 of the Ogoni prisoners held without trial -- on the same murder charges which were used to convict Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight associates -- were granted bail by the High Court in Port Harcourt but have yet to be released.

Background

In April 1998 the five government-sponsored political parties -- the only ones allowed to participate in the current "transition to civil rule", due to end in October 1998 -- announced that they would back the then head of state, General Sani Abacha, for President, provoking renewed criticism of the transition process. Political leaders in northern Nigeria, where military governments have traditionally received most support, have been detained without charge or trial for supporting calls for the government to keep its promise to hand over power.

Pro-democracy leader Chief Bola Ige was among several prisoners of conscience detained without charge or trial following the protests in Ibadan. He has not yet been freed, despite a court order for his release. Editor Femi Adeoti was one of nearly 40 charged with offences in connection with the unrest -- he was charged with sedition for publishing a report on the killings in the *Sunday Tribune* newspaper.

Dozens of students and other protestors have been arrested in recent days. Those detained without charge or trial include pro-democracy leaders Dr Arthur Nwankwo, Segun Aderemi and Uba Sani, arrested in an attempt to prevent protests planned to mark key dates for the opposition, including the anniversaries of the 1996 killing of Moshood Abiola's wife, Kudirat Abiola, and the annulment of the results of the 1993 presidential elections.
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