

AI INDEX: AFR 44/34/98
16 JUNE 1998

PUBLIC STATEMENT

NIGERIA

New head of state releases nine prisoners of conscience

The Nigerian government announced yesterday the release of nine prisoners of conscience and said that further cases would be under consideration. The military authorities in Lagos State also announced yesterday that those arrested and charged in connection with pro-democracy rallies in Lagos on 12 June, who included several leading human rights and pro-democracy activists, would be released and charges against them withdrawn.

Amnesty International welcomed these developments and urged the government to back up its call to exiles to return home and participate in the current "transition to civil rule" program by releasing further prisoners among the scores of prisoners of conscience and possible prisoners of conscience who remain in Nigeria's prisons and detention centres.

The nine prisoners whose release was announced by the head of state's office are: Frank Ovie Kokori, Milton Dabibi, retired General Olusegun Obasanjo, Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti, Chris Anyanwu, Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki, Chief Olabiyi Durojaiye, Uwen Udo and Chief Bola Ige.

BACKGROUND

There has been intensified pressure in recent months from the international labour movement on the Nigerian authorities and major oil companies operating in Nigeria for the release of **Frank Ovie Kokori** and **Milton Dabibi**. They are oil workers leaders who have been detained without charge or trial since a two-month strike by oil workers in 1994 -- Frank Kokori since August 1994 and Milton Dabibi since January 1996. In March the International Labour Organization (ILO) set up a commission of inquiry into persistent violations of trade union rights in Nigeria. The Nigerian government has denied repeated requests for a visit to Nigeria to investigate the situation or visit the detainees. The oil workers' strike was in part in response to the imprisonment of the winner of the 1993 presidential elections, Moshood Abiola, who is notably not among those released.

Also on the list of prisoners to be released were three from a group of about 30 prisoners still held following secret military treason trials in mid-1995. Former head of state 61-year-old **General Olusegun Obasanjo** is to be released into house arrest, and veteran human rights and democracy activist **Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti** and **Chris Anyanwu**, a senior woman newspaper editor. They had all been sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment following conviction on charges connected to an alleged coup attempt which appeared to have been devised as a pretext to rid the military government of its most persistent critics.

Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki, the 74-year-old former Sultan of Sokoto, a traditional leader of part of Nigeria's Muslim community, is also to be released on condition he does not return to Sokoto. After being deposed as Sultan by the government in April 1996, he was detained under

house-arrest in Taraba State more than 1,000 kilometres from his home. Acquitted of charges brought under the 1994 Failed Banks Decree, he remained in detention apparently because of his criticisms of the military government under General Abacha.

Chief Olabiyi Durojaiye, a 65-year-old lawyer, former Director of the Central Bank of Nigeria and presidential aspirant, has been detained in harsh conditions in military detention in Lagos since his arrest in December 1996. No reason was given for his detention which appeared to be because he had been a founding member of a leading opposition group of former officials and politicians, the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), many of whose leaders have been driven into exile by detentions and threats.

Uwen Udo is reportedly a pro-democracy politician who has been detained without charge or trial since his arrest in 1997.

Chief Bola Ige is a 67-year-old lawyer, former civilian governor of Oyo State and NADECO leader, who was arrested with more than 30 others following a pro-democracy march in Ibadan on 1 May 1998 in which at least seven demonstrators were reportedly shot dead by the security forces. Some of those arrested have been brought to court and charged with public order offences, but Bola Ige and others were detained without charge or trial, including Chief Ayo Opadokun, lawyer and NADECO's 58-year-old Secretary General, who was detained without charge or trial for two years from 1994 and who is not among those released.

Some of the prisoners were released on health grounds. Several have suffered serious ill-health while in prison. There have been recent reports of the deteriorating health of General Obasanjo, and Dr Ransome-Kuti and Chris Anyanwu had reportedly been transferred to Kaduna prison in order to receive medical treatment.

Concerns for the health of political prisoners increased dramatically following the unexplained deaths in December 1997 of two prisoners of conscience convicted in the same treason trials, former deputy head of state Major-General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua and Staff Sergeant Patrick Usikekpo, apparently from harsh conditions and medical neglect. Ibrahim Dasuki has reportedly required urgent hospital treatment after he became ill with typhoid fever during his detention, and Olabiyi Durojaiye was reported to have been haggard and disorientated in military detention.

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