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Nigeria: Full inquiry into death of prisoner of conscience Moshood Abiola needed now

Following the death yesterday of prisoner of conscience Moshood Abiola, Amnesty International today called for an independent pathologist to be involved in any autopsy and for their views to be expressed in the final report.

The organization said that, whatever the findings of the *post mortem* examination, an independent judicial inquiry should investigate whether medical neglect and harsh conditions of imprisonment may have contributed to his death.

“Chief Abiola was held for four years in solitary confinement, in harsh conditions, practically incommunicado,” Amnesty International said today. “It seems very probable that the physically and mentally stressful conditions under which he was held contributed to his unexpected death at the age of 60.”

“He is the third prisoner of conscience to die in custody in Nigeria recently. His death has taken place under suspicious circumstances which demand a full and independent investigation, which the Nigerian authorities have refused to carry out in the two previous cases.”

The Nigerian authorities said his death was the result of an apparent cardiac arrest but that an autopsy would be carried out in the presence of his personal physician. However, his personal physician has refused to be involved; he was denied virtually all access to his patient during his imprisonment and was himself detained for a few days after he publicized Moshood Abiola’s ill-health in April 1995.

Moshood Abiola was denied visits from his family from 1995. In June 1996 his wife Kudirat, who had campaigned for his release despite harassment and detention, was shot dead by unidentified gunmen widely believed to be government agents.

Suspicious about the cause of Moshood Abiola’s death have led to unrest on the streets of Lagos, Abeokuta and Ibadan in his political heartland of southwest Nigeria. At least 10 people have reportedly been killed and dozens injured in Lagos when angry crowds attacked northerners perceived to be supporters of the predominantly northern-led military governments in power since 1983. Police are also reported to have shot dead some protestors.

“This makes it all the more important that the autopsy be seen to be credible and satisfy public suspicions,” Amnesty International said.

Moshood Abiola's death came the day before many of his supporters expected him to be released. Nigeria's new head of state, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, had made a commitment to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan last week that Moshood Abiola and other political prisoners would be released. The announcement was due today, a month after the death of former head of state General Sani Abacha. More than 60 political prisoners have been released by the government and by the courts in recent weeks; dozens are still imprisoned.

Amnesty International is calling for the independent judicial investigation also to look into the deaths in custody of prisoners of conscience retired Major-General Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, a former deputy head of state and leading northern politician, and Staff Sergeant Patrick Usikekpo. They had both been convicted in connection with a fabricated coup plot after secret military treason trials in 1995, and died in separate prisons in December 1997. Required autopsies were not carried out into the causes of their deaths which apparently resulted from harsh conditions and medical neglect.

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