

Action

In Focus

An insight into the stories behind UAs

Public

January 2008

AI Index: ACT 60/002/2008

Justice for Jailed Journalist



Chief Manneh, © Private

On 31 January, the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is due to decide whether or not the Gambian authorities have a case to answer over the arrest of Chief Ebrima B. Manneh, a journalist who was detained nearly two years ago. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience and is calling for his immediate and unconditional release.

Chief Ebrima B. Manneh was arrested in July 2006 at the offices of the pro-government newspaper the *Daily Observer*. He was detained by plainclothes police officers who are

thought to have been from the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), who have subsequently denied any involvement in his arrest or continued incommunicado detention. Recent reports suggest that he is being held without charge at Fatoto Police Station in Eastern Gambia.

Chief Manneh was treated for high blood pressure at the Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital in the capital Banjul at the end of July 2007. He was reportedly escorted by members of the Police Intervention Unit which is a branch of the Gambian Police Force. Despite this, the Gambian Police Chief and Information Minister have denied any involvement in his arrest or any knowledge of his arrest.

After repeated attempts by his father and many fellow journalists to find out what happened to him, the Government issued an official statement on 21 February 2007 denying any involvement in Chief Manneh's arrest or any knowledge of his whereabouts.

Conflicting reasons for arrest

There are several conflicting reports to explain Chief Manneh's arrest. According to some sources he was arrested following a disagreement with Dr Saja Taal, the managing editor of the Daily Observer and a close ally of Gambia's leader, President Jammeh. Other sources claim that he was arrested after he had made contact with a foreign journalist before the Summit of the African Union (held in Banjul 1-2 July 2006) and that he was arrested for allegedly giving information to the journalist which was deemed damaging for the country's image. Other sources link his arrest to his alleged attempt to print a report which was critical of the government in the Daily Observer.

On 19 June 2007, an application was filed on behalf of Chief Manneh by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) to the Community Court of Justice of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) summoning the Gambian Government to answer charges over his disappearance. The hearing began 16 July 2007 in Abuja but the Gambian Government was not represented and ruling has been set for 31 January 2008.

Amnesty International has seen an overall deterioration of the human rights situation in the Gambia in the last 18 months. Following the alleged coup plot in late March 2006, more than 70 people were arrested and unlawfully detained for longer than the 72 hour period allowed in Gambian law without appearing before a judge. In addition to journalists and editors, lawyers, ordinary citizens, members of government and the military

were rounded up and detained. At least 12 people were allegedly tortured; whilst at least 21 others were subjected to enforced disappearance and are believed to currently be in detention. There has not however been an investigation into their whereabouts.

On 13 December 2004 the National Assembly passed two pieces of legislation, the Newspaper Amendment Act and the Criminal Code Amendment Act 2004. These required all print and broadcast owners to re-register and sign an agreement stating that they owned enough assets to pay any penalties that may be imposed by the courts and imposed a mandatory prison sentence for owners if convicted of publishing defamatory or 'seditious' material. On 16 December 2004, Deyda Hydara, a fierce critic of President Jammeh and advocate of press freedom was shot and killed whilst working in Banjul. His murder has never been solved nor investigated. Earlier that year the Human Rights Committee expressed its concern over the arbitrary arrests and detentions of journalists, human rights defenders and members of political opposition parties without charge. The Committee found that this practice was mainly carried out by the NIA after legitimisation given by decrees issued by the AFPRC (Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council).

To campaign on behalf of Chief Ebrimah Manneh, please contact your National Section or see the February issue of *The Wire*, available on www.amnesty.org