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The Gambia: Hundreds accused of “witchcraft” and poisoned in government campaign

Amnesty International today revealed that up to 1,000 people in The Gambia have been kidnapped from their villages by “witch doctors”, taken to secret detention centres and forced to drink hallucinogenic concoctions. The incidents are occurring in the context of a “witch- hunting campaign” that is spreading terror throughout the country.

Amnesty International called on The Gambian government to put an immediate stop to the campaign, investigate the incidents and bring those responsible to justice.

Eyewitnesses and victims told Amnesty International that the “witch doctors”, who they say are from neighbouring Guinea, are accompanied by police, army and national intelligence agents. They are also accompanied by “green boys” – Gambian President Yahya Jammeh’s personal protection guards.

According to information provided to Amnesty International by victims and their relatives, “witch doctors” have been visiting villages with armed security and taking villagers they accuse of being “witches” – many of them elderly – by force, sometimes at gunpoint. They are then taken to secret detention centres.

At the secret detentions centres, where some have been held for up to five days, they are forced to drink unknown substances that cause them to hallucinate and behave erratically. Many are then forced to confess to being a witch. In some cases, they are also severely beaten, almost to the point of death.

The liquid they are forced to drink has led many to have serious kidney problems. Two people are known to have died of kidney failure after having been subjected to the ordeal.

The most recent incident took place on the 9 March 2009 in Sintet village in the Foni Jarrol district, where up to 300 people were forced to go to the President’s farm in Kanilai. According to one eyewitness:

“At 5:00 am the paramilitary police armed with guns and shovels surrounded our village and threatened the villagers that anyone who tries to escape will be buried 6 feet under...Fear gripped the village...children were crying and traumatised. They randomly identified over 300 men and women who were forced at gunpoint into waiting buses and ferried to the President’s hometown. Once there, they were stripped and forced to drink ‘dirty water’ from herbs and were also bathed with these dirty herbs. A lot of these people who were forced to drink these poisonous herbs developed instant diarrhoea and vomiting whilst they lay helpless. I stayed there for five days. I experienced and witnessed such abuse and humiliation. I can not believe that this type of treatment is taking place in Gambia. It is from the dark ages.”

The incidents have taken place in the Foni Kansala district, an area near to President Jammeh’s farm of

Kanilai. However, many people are telling Amnesty International that the “witch hunting” campaign will spread throughout the rest of the country. Hundreds of Gambians have already fled to the Casamance region in Senegal after their villages were attacked.

The witch-doctors were invited to The Gambia early in the year, soon after the death of President Jammeh’s aunt. The President reportedly believes that witchcraft was used in her death.

On 8 March, Halifa Sallah, a prominent opposition figure who has written for the main opposition newspaper, Foroyya, about the activities of the witch-doctors, was arrested at his home. He has since been charged with sedition and spying, and is currently in Mile II, the Central Prison in the Gambia. His next court date is set for 25 March. Amnesty International is concerned that he is at risk of being tortured or ill-treated and that his trial will be unfair.

Halifa Sallah is former member of the Pan African Parliament and minority leader of the National Assembly. He is Secretary General of the People’s Democratic Organization of Independence and Socialism and coordinator of the National Alliance for Democracy and Development. He stood as a presidential candidate in the Gambia in 2006.