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EQUATORIAL GUINEA: GOVERNMENT OPPONENTS ARRESTED AND TORTURED IN
RUN UP TO ELECTIONS

Government opponents are being arrested and tortured in the run up to the first presidential elections since a multi-party political system was introduced in Equatorial Guinea in 1992, Amnesty International said today.

In an unexpected announcement in mid-January, the presidential elections scheduled for June were brought forward to 25 February. Since then, repression has intensified and scores of peaceful political opponents have been arbitrarily arrested and briefly detained, especially in the less accessible areas of the mainland region of Río Muni. Most have been subjected to ill-treatment or torture in police custody.

Amnesty International calls on the Equatorial Guinean government to stop harassing political opponents, to investigate all these incidents and to bring those responsible for harassing, arresting and torturing peaceful political activists to justice.

Those particularly targeted are members of the political parties comprised in the *Plataforma de Oposición Conjunta* (POC), Joint Opposition Platform -- which was arbitrarily dissolved by the electoral commission -- and its presidential candidate banned after one of the political parties in the POC decided to leave it in late January. The POC continued to call for a boycott of the elections.

Several members of the POC were arrested on 16 February by the security forces while they were attending French lessons at the French Cultural Centre in Malabo. They include Victorino Bolekia, the first democratically elected mayor of Malabo, the Equatorial Guinean capital, and Santiago Obama, Julián Ehapo, Celestino Bakale and Gaudencio Asumu, who are all councillors. Victorino Bolekia was released some hours later; the others two days later. All were severely beaten.

Political activists have also been threatened with arrest if they use foreign media to criticize the conduct of the electoral campaign. Genoveva Nchama, a member of the *Unión Popular* (UP) Popular Union party, was arrested in mid January and held for several weeks after she criticized the government on *Radio Exterior de España*. She was beaten while in detention.

Roman Catholic priests are also being targeted and have been forbidden to travel outside their parishes to carry out their duties. Several priests, including Father José Carlos Esono, have been arrested and tortured after being accused of opposing President Obiang Nguema's candidacy. There are orders of arrest against several other priests.

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