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Equatorial Guinea: Prisoners of conscience released

Amnesty International welcomes the release of five prisoners of conscience following a pardon decreed by President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo on the occasion of his 69th birthday, on 5 June.

The organization also calls on the government of Equatorial Guinea to end the persecution of political opponents. The government must immediately stop the torture and ill-treatment in custody of prisoners and should release all people held without charge or trial on account of their family or friendship links to political opponents. Those responsible for these human rights abuses must be brought to justice in fair trials.

The decree was broadcast on national radio and television on 4 June 2011. Twenty two prisoners including five prisoners of conscience and 17 political prisoners, who might have been prisoners of conscience, were pardoned. Twenty one of the prisoners were released from Black Beach prison in the capital, Malabo, in the afternoon of 7 June, and one from Evinayong prison, on the mainland, on 13 June.

Prior to their release, the "pardoned" prisoners were made to sign a document thanking President Obiang for his benevolence. They were also made to undertake not to commit offences similar to those for which they were pardoned; failing which they would be sent back to prison to complete their sentence, in addition to any new sentences imposed.

Those pardoned included former members of the banned political party Progress Party of Equatorial Guinea (Partido del Progreso de Guinea Ecuatorial - PPGE). Emiliano Pedro Esono Micha; Cruz Obiang Ebebere; Gumersindo Ramírez Faustino; Juan Ekomo Ndong and Gerardo Angüe were arrested without warrants in March 2008, because of their past association with the PPGE. They were charged with illicit association and possession of arms and ammunition. In June 2008 they were tried in an unfair trial, convicted of the charges and sentenced to six years in prison. Amnesty International considered them prisoners of conscience who had been arrested solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of association and assembly. They were convicted on the basis of statements they had signed under duress. The organisation campaigned for their release.

Florencio Elá Bibang and Antimo Abeso were also among those pardoned. Antimo Abeso was released on 13 June from Evinayong prison where he had been transferred in January 2010. Both men had refugee status in Cameroon. In June 2005, together with another man, Felipe "Pancho" Esono, they were abducted from Nigeria, as they were travelling through that country towards Benin, by Equatorial Guinean security personnel with the connivance of Nigerian security personnel. The three were then taken to Black Beach prison in Malabo where they were held incommunicado for several years. The three were charged with attempting to overthrow the government and tried in their absence by a military court in September 2005. They were convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison. Despite the fact that they were known to be held incommunicado in Black Beach prison, the authorities denied that they were holding the three men and said that the three men were tried in their absence because they were not in the country. Amnesty International was concerned about their abduction, unfair trial and the torture inflicted on Antimo

Edu Abeso Felipe Esono and campaigned for the authorities to acknowledge their detention; to carry out an investigation into the abduction and torture and for the prisoners to have access to medical treatment, their families and lawyers.

A further 15 political prisoners sentenced to long terms in prison in February 2004 for allegedly attempting to overthrow the government were also released under the pardon. They too were reportedly tortured to force them to confess.

Amnesty International remains concerned that despite a law that forbids torture and ill-treatment, no investigations into the torture of the released prisoners, or the abduction of some of them has been carried out. The organization calls on the government of Equatorial Guinea to investigate the reported torture of the released prisoners and the abductions and to bring to justice those found responsible of these human rights violations.

Amnesty International is also concerned at the detention in Bata prison without charge or trial of at least 30 people, including several women, since October 2010. They were arrested following the escape from Evinayong prison of two political prisoners together with six prison guards, on 12 October 2010. The detainees include the relatives and friends of the escaped prisoners. Among them is Angustia Raquel Mangué Obiang, wife of one of the escaped prisoners, who is being held incommunicado and has reportedly been tortured; and Maria Auxiliadora Moyong, the wife of a man the authorities said drove the car in which the prisoners escaped, and their 14- months-old baby son.

Amnesty International urges the Equatorial Guinea government to unconditionally and immediately release all these detainees unless they are charged with a recognisable offence and subjected to a fair trial. The organization further calls on the authorities to investigate the allegations of torture.