

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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UA 88/94 Fear of Ill-treatment in detention

4 March 1994

GABON: Nang-Veké Brice (alias Ali Ben)
and at least 40 others.

Amnesty International is concerned at reports that Nang-Veké Brice, a journalist at *Radio Liberté*, an opposition radio station, who was arrested on 22 February 1994, has been ill-treated in detention. At least forty other people were arrested on or after 22 February including 26 people who were arrested in Oyem following demonstrations protesting at the ransacking of *Radio Liberté*. The majority are reported to have been arrested at home, others as they erected barricades in the town. They are believed to be held in Oyem prison and are said to have been accused of public order offences. It is not known whether they have been formally charged. Amnesty International believes that many may be prisoners of conscience detained for their non-violent opposition to the government and is concerned that they may be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment in custody.

On 22 February, members of the Gabonese presidential guard, *Garde présidentielle*, ransacked *Radio Liberté*, a radio station which supports Paul Mba Abessole, leader of the opposition party, the National Rally of Lumberjacks, *Rassemblement national des Bûcherons* (RNB). The Gabonese authorities have accused *Radio Liberté*, which encouraged its listeners to support a general strike on 20 February, of encouraging social unrest and inciting violence. The radio station was badly damaged and has stopped broadcasting. Nang-Veké Brice, who is held at the central prison in Libreville, has reportedly been beaten while in detention and subjected to other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

The attack on *Radio Liberté* followed the arrest on 22 February of Jules Mbah-Békalé, advisor to the RNB, by members of the security forces. His 75-year-old aunt, his pregnant daughter, his 10-year-old daughter and a baby were detained for several hours, while Jules Mbah-Békalé was held for 48 hours before being released without charge. The security forces reportedly then went to the home of Paul Mba Abessole; he was not there and has apparently gone into hiding, fearing arrest. Seven people who were at the house, which was allegedly ransacked by the security forces, were arrested. It is not known whether they are still in detention.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Following presidential elections in December 1993, which returned the incumbent President El Hadji Omar Bongo, to power, Gabon has been increasingly beset by civil disturbances. The opposition has refused to accept the result, claiming the polls were fraudulent. A state of alert was imposed from 20 December 1993 to 13 February 1994 and re-introduced on 21 February after disturbances during the first day of a general strike. The strike was organised by the *Confédération gabonaise des syndicats libres*, Gabonese Confederation of Free Trade Unions, to call for wage increases following the devaluation of the CFA franc currency.

Measures imposed by the state of alert include emergency laws which allow for the detention of people considered a threat to public order, a night time curfew and the banning of demonstrations. The security forces have reportedly been authorised to strictly enforce these measures. At least nine people, including two members of the security forces, are known to have been killed between 20

and 24 February in disturbances in the capital. Three of those killed belonged to the RNB. The circumstances of the deaths are not clear though it seems that some, including the death of Antoine Mba Ndong who was killed as the *Garde présidentielle* attempted to arrest opposition leader Paul Mba Abessole at his home, may have been the result of the unnecessary or excessive use of lethal force by the security forces.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express and airmail letters either in French or in your own language:

- seeking assurances that the detainees named above are not being subjected to torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and that they be allowed immediate access to any necessary medical attention ;
- calling on the authorities to order an independent investigation into reports that Nang-Veké Brice was subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and to bring those found responsible to justice, and to take steps to prevent torture and other forms of ill-treatment;
- urging that Nang-Veké Brice and the other detainees be released immediately if they are not to be promptly charged with a recognizably criminal offence and brought to trial in conformity with international standards of fairness, and allowed to challenge in a court of law the legal basis for their detention;
- requesting to be informed of the reasons for the detention of Nang-Veké Brice and others arrested in February 1994 and the attack by the security forces on Radio Liberté, and whether they have been formally charged;

APPEALS TO :

1) Son Excellence, El-Hadj Omar BONGO
La Présidence, BP 546
Libreville, République du Gabon

Telex: 5211

Salutation: Monsieur le Président de la République

2) Monsieur Martin-Fidèle MAGNAGA
Ministre de la Défense nationale, de la sécurité et de l'Immigration
Ministère de la Défense nationale
Libreville, République du Gabon

Telexes: 5453

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre

3) Ministre de la Justice,
Garde des sceaux
Ministère de la Justice
BP 547, Libreville
République du Gabon

Telexes: 5255

Salutation: Monsieur le Ministre / Dear Minister

COPIES TO :

Madame Pascaline BONGO, Ministre des Affaires étrangères, de la Coopération et de la Francophonie, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, BP 2245, Libreville, République du Gabon

Monsieur le Redacteur en Chef, L'Union (newspaper), BP 3849, Libreville, République du Gabon

Monsieur le Redacteur en Chef, Africa No 1 (Radio station), BP 3935, Libreville, République du Gabon

and to diplomatic representatives of Gabon accredited to your country

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 15 April 1994.