

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

13 February 2001

AI Index AFR 32/005/2001 - News Service Nr. 26

Kenya: Tear Gas and Batons Stifle Political Debate

Amnesty International today described the arrest of another opposition member of parliament and the attacks on journalists attempting to cover political meetings, as "a threat to the very credibility of the political process" in the East African country. It would seem that Muungano wa Mageuzi (Movement for Change), the group to which the member of parliament belonged, has also been targeted ever since President Moi stated that he was banning the group in November 2000.

"The authorities in Kenya are attempting to stifle debate" an Amnesty International spokesperson said. "The physical suppression of the pro-democracy movement and peaceful political expression can only increase concerns that violence is assuming a central role in Kenyan politics."

On Friday 9 February in Kisii police erected road blocks and established a curfew in an attempt to prevent conveners, supporters and local residents from attending a Muungano wa Mageuzi rally. Police declared that the meeting was not licenced and could therefore not go ahead. (Under Kenyan law conveners of rallies are required to notify the police when they want to hold a meeting, the police do not however, have the power to license public meetings and on 4 February they had refused to accept advanced notification of the meeting.)

As James Orengo, MP, and his co-conveners were prevented by police from reaching the venue, they diverted into Kisii town where they attempted to speak to some of their supporters. However, they were

swiftly dispersed by police using tear gas and batons. James Orengo, still suffering from injuries inflicted during his arrest on 4 February, managed to escape.

Some of those attacked by the police responded by throwing stones and this fighting extended into surrounding streets and continued throughout the day and into Saturday 10 February. Scores were injured in the fighting and many more arrested. Police also targeted journalists and allegedly fired live bullets at a vehicle containing journalists from the East Africa Standard and the Kenya National Network. They escaped without serious injury.

The police harassment continued on Saturday 10 February when, in the early evening, police prevented *Muongano wa Mageuzi* supporters from attending another rally in Kisumu town, 45 miles north of Kisii. The police claimed they had "cancelled" this meeting. Once again using batons and tear gas they attacked *Muongano wa Mageuzi* supporters and local residents forcing them to flee. Sporadic street violence between demonstrators and police carried on into Sunday 11 February and culminated that evening with the arrest of Professor Peter Anyang' Nyong'o, Member of Parliament and acting Chairman of the Social Democratic Party. Another *Muongano wa Mageuzi* supporter, he had been attempting to address crowds in Holo, near Kisumu. He and eight others have been charged with incitement to violence and possession of illegal weapons. They deny the charges and are currently out on bail.

Amnesty International deplores the actions of the police in preventing these meetings going ahead and the violent methods employed by police. "Police continue to ignore the 1997 Constitutional amendments to the Public Order Act which were intended, in part, to facilitate the holding of peaceful political meetings. Whilst this continues

Amnesty International increasingly fears there can only be a downward spiral of violent suppression of pro-democracy meetings in Kenya."

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>