

PUBLIC STATEMENT
LIBERIA
Insecurity leads to more human rights abuses

In a climate of growing insecurity in Liberia, independent media and human rights defenders have recently been the target of an increasing clamp-down at the hands of the authorities.

Most recently, in what appears to be a fundamental attack on freedom of expression, on 15 October the Minister of Information stopped Star Radio -- an independent station which produces daily news bulletins -- from issuing information on the Internet. It claimed the station was operating as a news agency and required additional permission.

Human Rights defenders have also recently been targeted. Members of the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) of Liberia, a local Catholic human rights organization, were intimidated after issuing a statement on incidents in Monrovia over the weekend of 18/19 September 1998. The statement raised important human rights issues, made demands for transparency and accountability and ended with an appeal to members of the public to report all cases of alleged harassment and disappearances.

On 12 October, four JPC staff members were called to the Ministry of Justice to "give clarification on their recent statement," and the security forces were seen in the area around the house of its Director, Samuel Kofi Woods whose car was also impounded by the police. Rumours that a warrant for his arrest had been issued were later denied by the authorities.

Amnesty International urges the government of Liberia to respect the right of all human rights defenders to carry out their work without harassment or fear of arrest.

The organization is also calling on the Liberian authorities to investigate reports of human rights violations committed by the security forces in the context of fighting in Monrovia on 18 and 19 September 1998, which allegedly include summary executions, "disappearances" and arbitrary arrests.

Background

Although the government has stated that some 40 people were killed during the fighting on 18-19 September, reliable independent sources have been able to count at least 60 bodies. Given the

general level of insecurity in the area where the fighting took place, it seems likely that the real figure could be much higher than that. An investigation into the circumstances of these deaths has not yet been carried out and those responsible for them have not been identified.

On 1 October 1998, a government spokesperson announced that 11 people had been killed in a separate, but related, incident on 22 September 1998 in what was described as a “shoot-out “ between government soldiers and dissident troops trying to release their supporters from custody at the military detention centre, known as the Post Stockade.

On 9 October 1998 the government announced that it had charged 32 people, some *in absentia*, with treason, claiming it had uncovered evidence of meetings held between October 1997 and 18 September 1998 to overthrow the government. Those charged include Roosevelt Johnson, the leader of one of the former armed groups which fought during Liberia’s civil war, who has left the country and is currently in Nigeria. At least eight of those charged are in custody and two were allegedly ill-treated at the time of their arrest. It is essential that all those in custody are given immediate access to medical treatment, their families and a lawyer and promptly and fairly tried in accordance with international standards.

The September 1998 fighting started when government security forces entered Camp Johnson Road district -- a stronghold of Roosevelt Johnson and his supporters who are mostly from the Krahn ethnic group -- claiming the purpose of the intervention was to evict people from homes they were occupying illegally. This district had been insecure for some weeks and many people had fled because they feared becoming victims of rape, theft, or other attack by supporters of Roosevelt Johnson who were acting with apparent impunity.

In the light of the serious offences committed by both the security forces and supporters of Roosevelt Johnson , it is vital that all those responsible are brought to trial. This should include those responsible for deliberate and arbitrary killings and other human rights abuses during the weekend of fighting.

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