AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
PRESS RELEASE

Embargo Date: 14 February 2003 00:01 GMT

Liberia: Amnesty International calls for leading human rights activist's release as trial begins

Aloysius Toe should be immediately and unconditionally released, Amnesty International said today, as his trial on a trumped-up charge of treason was about to begin.

"Aloysius Toe has done nothing but work legitimately for the defence of fundamental human rights in Liberia. He should not be in prison and he should not be on trial," the organization said.

Aloysius Toe is a leading member of the National Human Rights Center, Secretary General of the Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders and Executive Director of the Movement for the Defence of Human Rights. His trial is scheduled to begin this morning in the capital, Monrovia.

He was arrested and charged on 4 November 2002 after he emerged from almost a week in hiding. A week earlier, his home had been raided by police and his wife arrested and briefly detained; three other human rights activists were also arrested and held for several days before being released without charge.

The charge of treason against Aloysius Toe is apparently based on a document by the armed opposition Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) purported to have been found at his home when it was raided by the police. The document, which he is alleged to have received by e-mail, is a public statement by the LURD which has been widely diffused, including on the internet, and sent to many individuals, both in Liberia and abroad. No other evidence of the offence of treason has been cited.

"There is no basis to the charge against Aloysius Toe," Amnesty International said. "The Liberian authorities must release him and end their persistent and unlawful attacks on the human rights community in Liberia."

Background

Aloysius Toe was arrested and charged after the Liberia Coalition of Human Rights Defenders, which groups some 20 human rights organizations, launched a week-long campaign in October last year to secure the release of fellow human rights activists Hassan Bility and Sheikh Sackor, and others.

Hassan Bility, a journalist with *The Analyst* newspaper, was held incommunicado and without charge or trial following his arrest on 24 June 2002. He was finally handed over to United States Embassy officials on 7 December 2002 and flown out of the country. Now in the United States he has recounted his terrible ordeal while in detention. He was severely tortured and held in appalling conditions. Sheikh Sackor,

Executive Director of Humanist Watch, has been held in incommunicado detention since 25 July 2002.

The government had accused both men of belonging to the LURD and initially said that they would be tried under military jurisdiction. No charges were, however, brought against them, they had no access to defence lawyers and were not brought before any court, despite several writs of *habeas corpus* submitted on their behalf. Although the government announced on 28 October that Hassan Bility and Shiekh Sackor were to be released - but under certain conditions which they had to agree to - they remained held. The conditions were not publicly disclosed but those detained were warned that they risked rearrest if they failed to meet them.

At the time of Hassan Bility's release the Liberian government was reported to have said that it was willing to hand over other detainees to United States officials. Amnesty International believes that the release of human rights activists who remain in detention, including Aloysius Toe and Sheikh Sackor, should be immediate and unconditional; it should not be dependent on intervention by other governments or their removal from the country.