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NIGERIA: ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF KEN SARO-WIWA'S EXECUTION, HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS CALL FOR REFORM

LAGOS -- [ALTERNATIVELY JOHANNESBURG] -- On the eve of the first anniversary of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, Amnesty International, together with Nigerian human rights organizations, today called on the Nigerian government to end human rights violations.

An Amnesty International delegation is in the country to mark the 10 November anniversary, and to launch a campaign against human rights violations in Nigeria. Nigerian human rights organizations such as the Civil Liberties Organisation and the Constitutional Rights Project are supporting the campaign.

"Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight colleagues cannot be brought back to life," said Pierre Sané, Secretary General of Amnesty International, at a press conference. "The best way to respond to the injustice of their trials and executions is for Nigerians to pledge that it will never happen again and then to take the necessary steps to ensure that it does not."

"The Nigerian authorities' clear disregard for the most basic and fundamental rights of their people can only result in scepticism about its proposed transition to civilian government by October 1998. One year after the trials, governments worldwide should be keeping up the pressure for improvement in the human rights situation and accept nothing less than substantial reforms from General Abacha's government."

In new reports issued today, Amnesty International and the Nigerian human rights organizations are putting forward a 10-point program for human rights reform. This program includes the release of all prisoners of conscience, the revocation of all military decrees which allow the indefinite or incommunicado imprisonment of political prisoners, the guarantee of fair trials for political prisoners, safeguards against torture and ill-treatment and abolition of the death penalty.

"Despite the international outcry and condemnation of the executions, the situation in Nigeria remains grave," Mr Sané said. "Nigerians who have the courage to stand up for the human rights of their fellow citizens continue to pay a heavy price. Human rights defenders and journalists have been singled out for beatings, detention and harassment."

Former head of state General Olusegun Obasanjo and human rights defender Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti remain imprisoned after secret and unfair trials by special military tribunals. Others have been detained for long periods without charge or trial. Many have been held in harsh conditions, denied the support of families and lawyers, their lives at risk from malnutrition and medical neglect.

Supporters of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) continue to face heavy repression by the authorities. At least 19 Ogoni still face the prospect of unfair trial and execution on the same murder charges which were brought against Ken Saro-Wiwa, President of MOSOP, and his co-defendants. The government has made little progress towards bringing the Ogoni 19 to trial and has held them in such terrible prison conditions that one of them died in August 1995 and others are said to be in serious ill-health.

Veteran civil rights lawyer Chief Gani Fawehinmi, a thorn in the side of military governments since the 1960s, has been detained without charge in harsh conditions since January 1996. He has been denied all access to family or doctor, despite apparently requiring urgent admittance to hospital on at least three occasions. In June this year, Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, senior wife of Chief Moshood Abiola who won the aborted presidential election in 1993, was murdered, it is widely feared, by government agents.

Amnesty International is particularly critical of the Civil Disturbances Special Tribunal which tried Ken Saro-Wiwa and the other Ogoni. Measures announced following a critical UN report in May 1996 have done little to reform the Tribunal. The removal of the one military member from the Tribunal does not affect the government's direct control over it while the right of appeal granted in July 1996 to prisoners convicted by future Civil Disturbance Special Tribunals allows an appeal only to another hand-picked special tribunal, a Special Appeal Tribunal, not to an independent higher court in the normal judicial system. Its convictions and sentences must still be confirmed by the military government.

“Given that the Nigerian government appears unprepared to genuinely reform the Ogoni Civil Disturbances Special Tribunal, it should be abolished before the 19 Ogoni prisoners suffer the same fate as Ken Saro-Wiwa and his colleagues,” Mr Sané said. “Although there have been releases of a few detainees, measures announced by the government as reforms are a sham.”

The government has revoked one military decree which specifically abolished the right of *habeas corpus* but has continued to flout court orders to release detainees or bring them before the court by invoking other military decrees which remove the courts' jurisdiction. The promised reviews of political detentions have not been undertaken by an independent, judicial body but in secret by the security officials who ordered the detentions in the first place. The latest review panel announced in October 1996 is headed by senior security officers and its recommendations have to be approved by the head of state. Chief Gani Fawehinmi's detention was reportedly extended after such a secret review, which confers no rights on the detainee and does not prevent arbitrary and indefinite detention.

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For further information, please refer to the following documents published on 6 November 1996: *Nigeria: Time to end contempt for human rights* (AI Index: AFR 44/14/96, 29 pages), *Nigeria: A 10-point program for human rights reform* (AI Index: AFR 44/15/96, 2 pages), and *Nigeria: Human rights defenders under attack* (AI Index: AFR 44/16/96, 28 pages).