

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL  
PRESS RELEASE**

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**TOGO: President Eyadema must release prisoners of conscience**

Amnesty International today appealed to the President of Togo, Gnassingbé Eyadema, who is on a private visit to France, to release two prisoners of conscience who were arrested in August and November 2001.

Yaowi Agboyibo, President of the *Comité d'action pour le renouveau (CAR)*, Action Committee for Renewal, an opposition party, has been imprisoned for denouncing the activities of a militia with close links to the current Prime Minister while Houndjo Mawudzro, secretary of the *Union nationale des étudiants togolais (UNET)*, National Union of Togolese Students, has been jailed for publicly describing the torture he suffered while in custody.

“For years, the Togolese authorities have given assurances to the international community that they will respect human rights but these two latest cases show only too well that these are empty promises,” the organization said.

On 3 August 2001 Yaowi Agboyibo was sentenced to six months’ imprisonment, after an unfair trial, for having stated in 1998 that “members of an RPT militia (*Rassemblement du peuple togolais*, Assembly of Togolese People, the ruling party), who are all armed and claim to have the support of Kodjo Agbéyomé, (current Prime Minister), are terrorizing the population unchecked by the authorities”. This information was also confirmed by the International Commission of Inquiry jointly set up by the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in order to investigate the extrajudicial executions alleged to have taken place in 1998. In its report published in February 2001, the Commission described violations carried out by “armed militia members closely linked to the authorities, who reportedly enjoy the support and encouragement of the current Prime Minister, Mr Agbéyomé Kodjo”.

Houndjo Mawudzro was arrested on 7 November 2001 and accused of ‘defamation of character’ and false accusations. His arrest came after he had made a statement to the press denouncing the acts of torture to which he had been subjected while he was briefly held in police custody in September 2001. In particular, he claimed that he had been beaten with a length of rope and that “... they made me sit on the ground with my feet stretched out. One man beat me on the legs and the shins with a *‘palmatoire’* (a type of flat stick) while another one beat me on the soles of the feet.”

“In both cases, the aim of the Togolese authorities is to intimidate and silence those who are brave enough to speak out about serious human rights violations,” Amnesty International stressed.

These arrests are merely recent examples in a long list of human rights violations committed regularly by the Togolese authorities over the last 30 years despite the repeated commitments

and promises they have given to respect fundamental freedoms.

“Last year, the Togolese authorities made a solemn promise to the international community that they would not take action against witnesses or people who agreed to cooperate with the OAU/UN International Commission of Inquiry. Nevertheless, at least a dozen people who testified before the Commission have been forced to leave the country after receiving threats,” Amnesty International reiterated. The conviction of Yaowi Agboyibo, who also testified before the Commission, is yet another attempt to intimidate witnesses.

At this time when President Eyadema is visiting France where he will meet, in particular, the French Head of State, Jacques Chirac, as well as the Minister of Overseas Aid, Charles Josselin, Amnesty International is appealing to the Togolese authorities to ensure that their actions finally match their promises.

“We are also appealing to the French authorities meeting with President Eyadema to call for the release of these two prisoners of conscience as well as for general respect for human rights in Togo,” the organization said.

## **BACKGROUND**

The two prisoners of conscience, Yaowi Agboyibo and Houndjo Mawudzro, are imprisoned in Lomé civil prison, which is severely overcrowded. On average 90 detainees are held in cells measuring four metres by six, with no electricity or windows. For punishment, up to sixteen detainees are often squashed into a single cell measuring one metre by two. Sanitation in the prison is appalling, with only two showers and two toilets for all the prisoners. All new arrivals at the prison must pay if they want to have a single mat to sleep on, to be called by the “crier” if they have a visitor or to have access to the toilets or shower.