

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Sierra Leone: Authorities must immediately disclose whereabouts of detained former minister and two others

Authorities in Sierra Leone must reveal the whereabouts of a former Defence Minister and two others arrested since 19 March, allow them access to their lawyers and families, and guarantee a fair trial, Amnesty International said today.

Former minister Alfred Paolo Conteh was arrested on 19 March for stepping in the State House with a gun ahead of a meeting on COVID-19 responses. Retired Colonel Sir Anthony Sinnah deputy commissioner of the National Commission on Small Arms and Prince George Jusu were also arrested in relation to the same incident. They were charged with treason and other related crimes. Their trial is ongoing, and hearings are scheduled to resume next week.

On 29 April, five inmates and two prison guards died following a riot amid COVID-19 case at Freetown's prison where the three accused were held. They were then transferred in an unknown location following that incident.

Amnesty International calls for information on the whereabouts of the detainees and the application of standard minimum rules for their treatment: standard accommodation, personal hygiene, food, medical services and other health care.

According to their lawyers there are concerns about the safety of their clients. The prison authorities have not yet responded to their letter requesting access to their clients. Even if lawyers cannot see the detainees in prison due to the measures put in place to fight COVID-19, authorities must ensure that lawyers are able to communicate with them, to assess their health and to coordinate their defence strategy.

Fair trial principles should be applied including the detainees having adequate opportunity to prepare a case, participate in future hearings, present arguments and evidence and challenge or respond to opposing arguments or evidence. They should be entitled to consult and be represented by a legal representative or other qualified persons chosen by them at all stages of the proceedings.