

### **Guinea-Bissau: Human rights under threat**

Human rights defenders and journalists are being threatened and arrested in a new wave of harassment in Guinea-Bissau, said Amnesty International.

“These incidents -- together with the beatings of civilians by soldiers -- reflect the fragile political situation following the civil war in 1998 and 1999. The new government's promise to protect and promote human rights has not been kept.”

In the latest incident, two state television journalists and a politician, who is also a prominent human rights defender, were arbitrarily arrested and held in harsh conditions. Paula Melo, the news editor, and Issufe Queta, a news presenter, were arrested, reportedly on the orders of Prime Minister Caetano N'tchama, at about 11:30 pm on 27 May. Fernando Gomes, president of a newly-formed political party, the Socialist Alliance of Guinea (Bissau) and former president of the Guinea-Bissau Human Rights League (HRL), was arrested the next morning.

Fernando Gomes had criticized the current political situation in the country in a public statement on 25 May. The Prime Minister had responded by accusing him of using the HRL funding to finance his campaign as a candidate in the November 1999 presidential elections. Fernando Gomes denied this and accused the Prime Minister of corruption, making false statements and incompetence.

The three detainees were held in very hot, filthy, windowless and unlit cells and were not allowed to receive visits from their lawyers or relatives. They were finally released on bail on 29 May. Fernando Gomes faces charges of slander and defamation and the journalists face related charges.

Human rights activists and journalists have been the targets of the arbitrary behaviour of the authorities and some have even been threatened:

On 12 May, senior military officers reportedly said that they would have Inácio Tavares, the current president of the Human Rights League, and other League members beaten. The League had issued a press statement on 11 May expressing concern about several reports that soldiers had beaten civilians. League members had been threatened on previous occasions.

On 17 May, after firing shots, soldiers entered the premises of the newspaper *Diário de Bissau*, which had published an opinion piece criticising the allegedly excessive spending by the wife of President Kumba Ialá. In a threatening way, soldiers questioned journalist Bakary Mané, who was alone in the office at the time. *Diário de Bissau* journalists often receive threats on account of their work. The newspaper's director, João de Barros, had received a death threat in December 1999 following complaints by soldiers regarding his coverage of the military.

On 27 May Esna Seidi, a journalist of the national radio, was suspended -- without due process -- reportedly on the orders of the Secretary of State for Social Communications after he had apologised to listeners for the late start of the morning's broadcast due to the late arrival of the vehicle collecting journalists. After a meeting on 30 May, at which the Prime Minister addressed journalists, Esna Seidi, as well as Issufe Queta and Paula Melo, who had also been suspended, were reinstated in their posts.

“Brigadier Ansumane Mané, who ousted President João Bernardo Vieira in May 1999, promised that soldiers would return to barracks. Instead, soldiers frequently abuse their powers and carry out human rights violations,” said Amnesty International.

In a press statement the Guinea-Bissau Human Rights League gave details of several incidents of military abuse in the capital, Bissau:

Alcebiades Teixeira was beaten by police on 28 April allegedly for swearing in the presence of President Kumba Ialá's bodyguard;

Domingos Mendes was beaten on 8 May apparently for stationing his car incorrectly when Brigadier Ansumane Mané's motorcade passed by;

a group of soldiers entered the electricity generating station and beat and briefly detained three technicians whom they blamed for a power cut at the military base.

soldiers severely beat a youth who failed to greet them.

“The government must take urgent steps to end the beatings and arbitrary arrests and it must bring to justice those suspected of perpetrating such abuses of power,” Amnesty International said . “All those in authority must lead by example and set high standards for the protection of human rights.”

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