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Cameroon: Human rights defender targeted and harassed on the eve of a major international human rights conference

The arrest yesterday of a respected human rights lawyer underlines a consistent pattern of intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders in Cameroon, Amnesty International said today.

Abdoulaye Math, President of the *Mouvement de la défense des droits de l'homme et des libertés (MDDHL)* - Movement for the defence of freedom and human rights - was arrested on 16 January 2002 in Yaoundé, Cameroon, by officials of the *Centre national de recherche extérieure* (National Centre for External Research), a body composed of members of the security forces from the police, the gendarmerie and the army.

Abdoulaye Math was travelling to Dublin, Ireland, where he was to speak on the human rights situation in Cameroon at the international Platform for Human Rights Defenders, attended among others by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Hina Jilani, and the Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern.

After his arrest, Abdoulaye Math was taken to a police station where he was detained for five hours and his passport and all the documents he had on him were confiscated. He was released at around 1:00 am by a police officer who told him that "You can go to your hotel since we know that we have all your papers with us". He had an appointment with the Director of the National Centre for External Research today, 17 January 2002, where he pleaded for his papers to be returned to no avail.

"The temporary arrest of Abdoulaye Math and the confiscation of his documents on the eve of his participation in such an important international human rights conference are a clear sign of the continuous contempt by the Cameroonian government for human rights defenders and activists in the country," Amnesty International said.

"This incident is further testimony of Cameroon's clear disrespect for international standards protecting human rights defenders," the organization added. Such standards include the Johannesburg Declaration on Human Rights Defenders in Africa of 1998, and the non-observance of the United Nations 1998 *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*.

Amnesty International is once more urging the Cameroonian government to put an end to a practice which violates the freedom of movement and the freedom of expression of Cameroonians and to respect international standards for the protection of human rights defenders.

Background

Attempts to actively harass and silence human rights defenders from the MDDHL and other human rights organizations have been ongoing in Cameroon.

On 27 August 2001 Abdoulaye Math was arrested in Ngaoundéré, Northern Cameroon, by officials of the National Centre for External Research. He was taken to a Police station and was forced to undress by a superior officer (*Commissaire de police*) who also confiscated all the documents he had on him. In spite of protests the documents were not restituted.

On 29 October 2001, the office of the MDDHL in Hardé, Maroua, North Cameroon, was vandalised and important documents were stolen from it together with written testimonies from victims of human rights violations.

Despite appeals by human rights defenders in the region and Amnesty International for the respect of human rights by security forces, the Cameroonian government has failed to take any action.

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