

AI Index: AFR 17/03/99  
26 October 1999

## **MEDIA ADVISORY**

### **Cameroon's human rights record under scrutiny by the United Nations**

The consideration of Cameroon's third periodic report by the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee (HRC) on 27 and 28 October in Geneva provides an important opportunity for serious scrutiny of Cameroon's human rights record which has shown little improvement since its previous report was considered in 1994. Cameroon has continued to blatantly violate its commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Several hundred people have been extrajudicially executed by the security forces since March 1998 in a campaign against armed robbery in the north of the country. Torture and ill-treatment of prisoners and detainees, some of whom have died as a result, remain routine, despite legislation passed in January 1997 which prohibited torture. Conditions in Cameroon's prisons are extremely harsh with severe overcrowding, inadequate or non-existent sanitary facilities and seriously deficient diet and health care. There is a high mortality rate among prisoners. Others have died when the security forces appeared to have used excessive or lethal force.

Critics and opponents of the government, including journalists, supporters of opposition political parties and human rights activists, continue to be arbitrarily detained and imprisoned. The imprisonment of prominent journalist Pius Njawé for 10 months during 1998 was widely condemned both within and outside Cameroon. In December 1998 the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that Pius Njawé's imprisonment violated the right not to be arbitrarily detained and the right to freedom of expression, both of which are guaranteed by the ICCPR.

More than 50 people from Cameroon's English-speaking provinces were detained for over two years in connection with violent events in North-West Province in March 1997 before finally being brought before a military tribunal in the capital, Yaoundé. At least 10 of those arrested subsequently died as a result of torture or lack of medical care.

The trial of these prisoners and some 20 other defendants before the military tribunal was neither independent nor impartial and failed in several other fundamental respects to conform to international fair trial standards, including the ICCPR. The HRC has recommended that the jurisdiction of military tribunals should not extend beyond military disciplinary matters and has recommended that all trials concerning civilians be held before civilian courts. At the conclusion of the trial on 6 October 1999, 36 defendants were convicted and sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from one year to life.

Another five prisoners from the English-speaking community have been held for up to four years without charge or trial.

Five years ago, in March 1994, during the consideration of Cameroon's second periodic report, the HRC deplored the many cases of illegal detention, torture, death sentences and extrajudicial executions in Cameroon. The HRC concluded that freedom of expression was not guaranteed and that torture and ill-treatment appeared to be practised systematically. The HRC recommended that the government take all necessary measures to end these human rights violations and to bring those responsible to justice. Since then, however, there is little evidence that the government has made any serious attempt to implement these recommendations.

The HRC is composed of 18 experts who are elected by states parties to the ICCPR. It monitors implementation by states of their obligations under the Covenant. The experts act in their personal capacity and do not represent any government. The HRC meets three times a year to review written reports from states. Other reports being considered by the HRC during this session include those of China (Hong Kong), Republic of Korea, Morocco, Norway and Portugal (Macao).

See also: *Cameroon: Blatant disregard for human rights*, published by Amnesty International on 16 September 1997, (AI Index: 17/16/97); *Cameroon: Extrajudicial executions in North and Far-North Provinces*, published by Amnesty International in December 1998 (AI Index: 17/16/98); and *Cameroon: Lengthy prison terms after unfair trial before military tribunal*, published by Amnesty International on 7 October 1999.

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