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Cameroon: Impunity in face of large-scale extrajudicial executions in the Douala area

Amnesty International today expressed grave concerns about the discovery of a mass grave with more than 36 bodies close to the Douala international airport in Cameroon.

" The discovery of this mass grave heightens the fears about the fate of large numbers of people who have "disappeared" during the last eight months after being detained by security forces," Amnesty International said.

Nine other bodies were discovered in early May close to the village of Petit Dimbaba south of Douala, the economic capital of the country.

Since April an increasing number of deaths and "disappearances" have been reported by individuals and the press in Cameroon. Bodies, apparently of suspected criminals, have repeatedly been found in the streets, in several cases bearing signs of torture and bullet wounds. The Cameroonian branch of the non-governmental organization *Action des Chrétiens pour l'Abolition de la Torture* (ACAT), Christian Action for the Abolition of Torture, listed 29 victims in late August and reported a still greater number of unidentified persons killed.

Civil society groups, religious leaders and the press in Cameroon have repeatedly criticized the inconsistency of the government response to allegations of summary killings by the special security force, the *Commandement opérationnel*, particularly in Douala, said the organization. During October and November journalists and religious leaders commenting on the allegations of extrajudicial executions have come under sharp criticism from the government and felt threatened.

No independent and open investigation has so far been undertaken into individual allegations or the general behaviour of members of the *Commandement opérationnel*.

"There must be an immediate investigation into all allegations of killings and torture by the security forces in order to bring those responsible to justice," Amnesty International added.

It is still unclear how many people may have been killed, and the Catholic Bishop of Douala, Cardinal Christian Tumi, accuses the government of condoning the killing of more than 500 people in and around Douala since April by its silence on the practices of its security services.

The government and security forces have not been able to give conclusive answers concerning the identity of those killed, the reason and circumstances of their death and the role of the *Commandement opérationnel* in the killings. A government minister denied all allegations of a mass grave, stating that the bodies recently found were buried as part of a large number on 12 August by a hospital regularly relieving its morgue from non-retrieved bodies.

On 23 November 2000 the United Nations Committee Against Torture, referring to Cameroon's record, called on the government to "consider dismantling special forces to combat banditry, as these forces had been accused of numerous human rights abuses", to "carry out energetic investigations into all allegations of human rights violations and torture", and to "maintain scrupulously a publicly accessible register of detainees".

The latest discoveries of bodies clearly show the persistent unwillingness of the Cameroonian government to bring an end to torture and extrajudicial executions. "The government must take immediate action to regain control over its security services, to end torture, and to display respect for the life and physical integrity of all its citizens", Amnesty International pointed out today.

Background

In February 2000 the *Commandement opérationnel* was set up as a reaction to a sharp increase in crime rates in Douala and Yaoundé. It is accused of the large-scale extrajudicial executions after conducting what in many cases appear to be indiscriminate round-ups of criminal suspects. The *Commandement opérationnel* has also been responsible for beatings, rape and other cruel and degrading treatment of suspects.

In the past years Amnesty International frequently reported on cases of torture and ill-treatment in Cameroon. The organization has raised concerns on extrajudicial executions in the north of the country in security operations by the *Brigade anti-gang* to combat armed robbery since 1998.

In his report published in February this year, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture Sir Nigel Rodley, criticised the "widespread and systematic" presence of torture and ill-treatment in Cameroon's gendarmerie and police cells.

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