

AI Index: AFR 30/02/99  
23 March 1999

## **PUBLIC STATEMENT**

### **GUINEA BISSAU: A NEW OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE A CULTURE OF ACCOUNTABILITY.**

Amnesty International, whose delegates are in Guinea-Bissau for the first time since conflict began in June 1998, today urged the international community to seize the opportunities created by the peace process to promote a new culture of accountability and respect for human rights.

Serious violations of human rights occurred during the conflict, including arbitrary detention of suspected political opponents, torture, deliberate and arbitrary killings, indiscriminate killings and other violations of international humanitarian law among which the placing of heavy weapons near a hospital and other civilian centres.

Amnesty International delegates were concerned to discover that human rights abuses have continued since the end of the fighting and witnessed soldiers beating unarmed civilians after a demonstration for peace on 9 March in Bissau, the capital.

Despite the fragility of human rights protection in Guinea-Bissau characterised by the non-functioning of the judicial system, Amnesty International has noted progress in the implementation of the November 1998 Peace Agreement. Peacekeeping forces of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) have been deployed; opposing military forces have been disarmed and returned to barracks; foreign troops which supported the government of President João Bernardo Vieira are being withdrawn and mine-clearing has begun.

Amnesty International is encouraged by plans to promote the social and economic rehabilitation of the country and recognises that progress in these sectors will facilitate an improvement in the human rights situation.

The organisation was encouraged by the personal assurances of Prime Minister Francisco Fadul that the new Government of National Unity is committed to upholding human rights. However, Amnesty International is convinced that the political and material support of the international community to the government and to the emerging institutions of a vibrant civil society will be essential to secure accountability.

On March 3rd, the UN Secretary-General wrote a letter to the President of the Security Council in which he made recommendations on the role of the UN in the peace and reconciliation

process in the country, including the proposal to place human rights officers as part of the team of the new Representative of the Secretary-General in Guinea-Bissau. Last week, he also presented a report to the Security Council in which he stated that “The economy, basic social services and state institutions all need to be virtually rebuilt from scratch”.

Amnesty International welcomes the proposal of the Secretary-General to include human rights officers amongst the team of the Representative of the Secretary-General in Guinea-Bissau. As the Security Council considers the Secretary-General’s report, Amnesty International wishes to make the following recommendations to the new Government of National Unity and the international community:

1. support to institutions of civil society to ensure a widespread program of civic education, including about the right to vote and other human rights; support for the return of key trained personnel, particularly judicial and other officials, to ensure the rehabilitation of the justice system and access to justice;  
promotion of accountability for human rights violations in the past including those committed in the context of the conflict;  
posting of international observers to oversee the preparation and conduct of elections including monitoring of the conduct of those responsible for security to ensure that there is no political intimidation of political opponents, and the conduct of the media to ensure reporting consistent with free political activity.

In the longer-term, Amnesty International urges the international community to continue its support to institutions of democracy and human rights to develop a culture of accountability in accordance with international human rights standards, including for:

- restructuring the police to ensure its accountability to the elected civilian government, as well as providing professional and human rights training;
- promoting the independence of the judiciary, assisting in the provision of adequate resources and training at all levels and the establishment of a system of juvenile justice;
- promoting the improvement of prison conditions and the training of prison officials;
- ensuring that the reunified armed forces are made accountable to civilian authority and that they are trained in the observance of human rights and international humanitarian law;
- continuing support to human rights education and national non-governmental groups working to promote the whole range of human rights.

All these measures will require extensive collaboration, consultation and co-ordination between national NGOs and institutions and the various regional and international actors involved in the peace and rehabilitation process.

Amnesty International also urges the Guinea-Bissau government, as part of its expressed commitment to uphold human rights, to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the UN Convention against Torture and Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

Amnesty International is recommending these measures as essential to the construction of a durable peace in Guinea-Bissau.

**Background:**

Fighting broke out in Guinea-Bissau in June 1998 following an army mutiny. Despite a truce signed on 26 July 1998, which was reaffirmed in August, and a peace accord signed in November 1998,

fighting recurred in both October 1998 and again in early February 1999. A new Government of National Unity was sworn in on 20th February 1999. Guinea-Bissau's first multi-party elections were held in 1994.

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