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PUBLIC STATEMENT
Guinea-Bissau

**The international community must stand by its commitment to assist
the Guinea-Bissau government to protect human rights**

Amnesty International is concerned that the burst of fighting in Bissau on 6 and 7 May should not delay the assistance promised by the international community to ensure respect for human rights in the post-conflict reconstruction of the country.

The recent fighting was ignited by a dispute over the disarming of the *Aguentas* (“those who resist”) militia loyal to President Vieira in accordance with the terms of the peace agreement signed in November 1998 between President João Bernardo Vieira and Brigadier Ansumane Mané, the *Junta Militar* leader.

Troops of the *Junta Militar*, which had accused the loyalist forces of previous violations of the agreement, seized control of central Bissau, resulting in the surrender of the loyalist troops, and escorted President Vieira to the Portuguese embassy where he was granted asylum. The *Junta Militar* has subsequently reiterated its intention to return to barracks.

The Government of National Unity installed in February 1999 under the terms of the peace agreement has not been disrupted and elections are to be held on 28 November 1999 as previously agreed. In accordance with the Constitution, the President of the National Assembly, Malam Bacai Sanha, has been nominated interim Head of State.

Amnesty International has called on the international community to provide aid for the rehabilitation and reform of key institutions necessary for the protection of human rights, in particular the judicial system and the law enforcement agencies. It is also vital that the United Nations (UN) proceeds with the proposed deployment of human rights officers, within a team led by the newly appointed Representative of the UN Secretary-General, whose tasks would include monitoring the human rights situation and providing technical assistance and support to non-governmental organizations working to protect and promote human rights.

Hundreds of civilians and soldiers are reported to have been killed and injured in the shelling in May. After the fighting, angry crowds attacked the presidential palace and the French embassy where they thought President Vieira was hiding. Embassy premises and some private homes were also looted but the *Junta Militar* promptly took measures to stop the looting.

Amnesty International has made inquiries about the situation of about 500 military and security officials, young *Aguenta* soldiers and police officers detained during the recent fighting who are being held in four centres in Bissau. The Guinea-Bissau Human Rights League and the

International Committee of the Red Cross have access to the prisoners who are not reported to have been ill-treated. Some detainees may be prosecuted, including high-ranking military officials suspected of being involved in illegal arms traffic to separatist rebels in neighbouring Senegal. The authorities in Guinea-Bissau have also called for President Vieira to be tried in connection with the arms traffic.

Other soldiers are temporarily being held officially for their own protection against possible revenge attacks. On 13 May, 186 *Aguenta* militias were released and returned to their families -- some were child soldiers aged between 15 and 18 years old. The Human Rights League is hosting a program to reintegrate them into society. It is also participating in public awareness radio programs to minimize the danger of reprisals and revenge attacks.

The Government of National Unity has repeatedly stated that human rights will be respected. It has disbanded the security police who were responsible for many human rights violations in the past and has launched inquiries into certain cases of human rights violations. Welcoming these developments, Amnesty International has called for the perpetrators of these and other human rights violations committed prior to and during the recent conflict to be brought to justice.

The human rights organization has also urged the authorities to undertake a thorough review of the criminal justice system to ensure a coherent and comprehensive reform of the judicial, law enforcement and penal institutions. It believes that the failure to protect fundamental economic, social, civil and political rights was one of the causes of the conflict and thus urges the international community to help Guinea-Bissau develop effective institutions for the protection of human rights.

Background

The conflict began on 7 June 1998 after Brigadier Mane was dismissed from his post as armed forces chief and accused of involvement in the illegal sale of arms to Casamance rebels in Senegal. Most of Guinea-Bissau's armed forces rallied in support of the *Junta Militar* which also gained wide popular support. By the end of October 1998 the *Junta Militar* had taken control of the majority of the country with the exception of the centre of Bissau and the Bijagos Archipelago. The peace agreement signed on 1 November was broken by three days of fighting in February 1999. A total of over 3,000 Senegalese and Republic of Guinea troops which President Vieira had called to his aid had left the country by 23 March.

The conflict caused immense suffering with hundreds of people killed or injured and hundreds of thousands displaced. Scores of civilians and soldiers were arrested, many were tortured and some were extrajudicially executed by forces loyal to President Vieira. The *Junta Militar* also imprisoned civilians and ill-treated some. There were also reports that soldiers who surrendered or were captured in battle were deliberately killed by both sides.

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