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Côte d'Ivoire: journalists threatened with death and rape in full view of the Ivorian security forces

Since Monday, 16 January 2006, several journalists of *Radio télévision ivoirienne* (RTI) have been subjected to verbal abuse and systematic intimidation by groups of demonstrators proclaiming themselves to be "*Jeunes Patriotes*" (Young Patriots). Their activities have taken place in full view of the security forces who have taken no action to prevent them or to arrest those responsible. At least two RTI journalists were publicly threatened with death and rape by demonstrators who occupied the premises of the RTI, aided and abetted by some of the most senior officials of the security forces.

"These acts of violence and intimidation – condoned by the presence of law and order officials – constitute a violation of the right to freedom of expression; the authorities must immediately take all necessary action to pursue the perpetrators and prevent their reoccurrence," Amnesty International insisted today.

The "*Jeunes Patriotes*" surrounded the RTI on Monday, 16 January, as a protest against the statement made public the previous day by the Groupe de Travail International (GTI, the international mediation group on Côte d'Ivoire) that the mandate of members of parliament, which expired on 16 December 2005, "*was not to be extended*". A witness described to Amnesty International how the "*Jeunes Patriotes*" had been able to gain access to the RTI: "*The security forces led by the army chief of staff and the commander of the Centre de commandement des opérations de sécurité (CECOS, Security Operations Command Centre) ordered RTI security guards to let the demonstrators into the building. The demonstrators wanted to transmit a public statement on air and forced the presenter of the 13.00 news out of his studio. They then insulted and threatened the journalists. The security forces seemed to be colluding with the crowd and said: 'We cannot fire on our brothers'.*"

Amnesty International has obtained consistent reports of threats of rape – in public and in the presence of the security forces – made against one of the women journalists at the RTI on Monday, 16 January. A witness told Amnesty International: "*The demonstrators asked where this journalist, who was not there that day, was and said 'We are going to rape her'.*" This particular journalist has for several months been the target of serious threats made by self-styled members of the "*Jeunes Patriotes*".

Despite the gravity of these threats – which have been repeated in the Ivorian press – the Ivorian authorities appear to have done nothing to ensure her safety or to bring those responsible to justice.

In addition, according to a witness's account, death threats were made against an RTI official on Wednesday, 18 January, by demonstrators who had occupied the television centre. The witness described to Amnesty International: "*Around 9 o'clock in the morning I saw about a hundred demonstrators who said in relation to an RTI official: 'Where is he? We are going to kill him'. The security forces were there but said nothing*".

Other journalists have described the serious accusations made against them by demonstrators. "*They have made us out to be rebels lying in wait and assailants,*" one journalist told Amnesty International.

Amnesty International is also concerned by the part played by some elements of the media which have for years incited xenophobia and spread messages of hate. This concern is shared by the United Nations (UN) which on 18 January called on the Ivorian government to bring an end to "*hate messages*" inciting the population to take up arms against UN peacekeeping forces deployed in Côte d'Ivoire.

The crucial role played by some of the media in the upsurge of violence was clearly stressed in UN Security Council Resolution 1572, adopted on 15 November 2004, which demanded that the "*Ivorian authorities stop all radio and television broadcasting inciting hatred, intolerance and violence*". For his part, the UN Secretary-General denounced, in December 2004, the fact that "*tensions in Abidjan*" were "*fuelled by messages broadcast on State-run radio and television by supporters of President Gbagbo inciting hatred and violence against the French forces and also French citizens*". Ivorian civilians and nationals of other countries in the region bearing Muslim family names have also been targets of violent attacks.

Background information

On 15 January 2006 the GTI declared that the mandate of members of parliament, which expired on 16 December 2005, "*was not to be extended*". The following day demonstrators blocked main roads in Abidjan and some other towns in Côte d'Ivoire. Demonstrators attacked vehicles and buildings of the UN peacekeeping forces deployed in Côte d'Ivoire since 2004. At least four people were killed on 18 January 2006 in clashes in the west of the country between supporters of the Ivorian President, Laurent Gbagbo, and Bangladeshi peacekeeping troops. Supporters of President Gbagbo also demonstrated in front of the French Embassy in Abidjan.

On Wednesday, 18 January, President Gbagbo and his Prime Minister, Charles Konan Banny, called on their fellow citizens to "*retreat from the streets*" and "*go back to work*" after a meeting with the Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo, Chairman of the African Union (AU).

Since the beginning of the conflict which effectively cut Côte d'Ivoire in two in September 2002, Amnesty International has on very many occasions publicly voiced its concern about attacks on freedom of expression. Broadcasting of programmes by international radio stations including Africa No.1, the BBC and *Radio France Internationale* (RFI) has frequently been blocked. Newspapers associated with the

opposition, such as *Le Patriote*, *Le Libéral* or *Le Nouveau Réveil*, have also been targeted; distribution of these newspapers has on several occasions been prohibited in the part of the country controlled by government forces.

These serious attacks on freedom of expression have prompted protests by the Union des journalistes de Côte d'Ivoire, the Ivorian journalists' union, and the Observatoire de la liberté de la presse, de l'éthique et la déontologie (OLPED), an Ivorian organization which monitors respect of freedom of the press, as well as other international organizations.