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Nigeria: Human rights defender beaten unconscious at police check point

Amnesty International today condemned the unlawful assault of Sebastian Kpalap, a human rights defender and his brother-in law, Sunday Pilla and urged the Nigerian authorities to launch an immediate investigation into the incident. The men were brutally assaulted after refusing to pay a bribe to an officer at a police checkpoint in Rivers state, Nigeria.

The pair were assaulted outside the Divisional Police Headquarters, Kpor, Rivers state on 1 August 2010. They were returning to Bodo town after buying palm wine for the funeral of Kpalap's father. As they were passing the police station on a motorcycle, they were stopped by a uniformed policeman who asked for 50 Naira. When they refused to pay, the police officer struck Sunday Pilla across the head with a stick. According to Kpalap, four other plainclothes police officers who had been standing outside the station then joined the assault on Pilla. When Sebastian Kpalap asked them to stop, he was beaten across the head with a stick until he lost consciousness. Sunday Pilla was beaten unconscious and taken into the police station.

On regaining consciousness, Sebastian Kpalap entered the police station where he found Sunday Pilla still unconscious and lying on the floor. Both men were held in the police station for approximately five hours where they were refused medical treatment or access to a lawyer. Sebastian Kpalap was able to contact the Coordinator of the non-governmental organisation he works for, the Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development (CEHRD), and the organisation eventually secured the release of the two men. Sunday Pilla and Sebastian Kpalap then went to the Terabor General Hospital, where they received treatment for their injuries.

The police later claimed that Sebastian Kpalap attempted to disarm a police officer and that Sunday Pilla beat the same police officer.

The assault of Sebastian Kpalap and Sunday Pilla must be fully investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice. The authorities must send a clear signal that such behaviour will not be tolerated and perpetrators will be held accountable.

Background

The Nigeria Police Force operate in a climate of almost total impunity for their use of unlawful force, arbitrary detention, extra-judicial executions and disappearances and torture.

Commercial drivers and other road users are often stopped and asked to pay bribes at police checkpoints. In their recent report "Killing at Will: Extrajudicial executions and other unlawful killings by the police in Nigeria" AFR44/038/2009, Amnesty International documents a catalogue of human rights violations by the Nigeria Police Force, including the shooting to death of drivers who fail to pay them bribes at checkpoints

- *On 26 May 2010, Justine Ijeomah, Secretary of the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), was assaulted by a police officer whilst in police detention at Mile 1 Police Station.*

He was detained after a juvenile for whom he had acted as surety failed to return to the police station at the agreed time.

- *On 23 April 2010, four members of staff of the CLO Rivers' Branch, including Justine Ijeomah, were threatened with being shot after their car was pulled over and searched by police officers. They were taken to Olu Obasanjo police station, where they were later released by the Divisional Police Officer.*
- *On 5 April, three human rights activists from the non-governmental organisation Social Action, were assaulted and detained by police in Port Harcourt*

50 Naira is equivalent to 0.33 USD.