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Chad: Human rights crisis brewing in aftermath of attack on N'Djamena

Amnesty International today urged the Chadian government to stop persecuting senior members of political opposition parties, journalists and supporters – actual or perceived – of opposition political groups.

Lol Mahamat Choua, Ngarlegy Yorongar and Ibno Mahamat Saleh were all arrested on 3 February in the capital, N'Djamena, and there are serious concerns for their safety.

The whereabouts of Wadel Abdel Kader Kamougue, a leading opposition figure, remain unknown, although the Chadian Minister of Communication said that he evaded arrest and has been in hiding since 3 February.

On 14 February, the Chadian Minister of Internal Affairs, Mahamat Ahmat Bachir, confirmed that Lol Choua was detained in a military prison. The next day, French authorities in Chad acknowledged that their ambassador had met Lol Choua. However, to this day, family members, doctors and lawyers have been refused permission to meet him.

Ngarlegy Yorongar and Ibno Mahamat Saleh have not been seen since they were arrested by Chadian security forces.

“These men are either in incommunicado detention or have been subjected to enforced disappearance,” said Tawanda Hondora, Deputy Director of Amnesty International’s Africa Programme. “This clamp down on members of peaceful political opposition groups, which mirrors the targeting of opposition groups and army officers in the aftermath of the abortive April 2006 N'Djamena attack by armed groups, is extremely worrying.”

“Amnesty International is very concerned about the health and safety of these men. They should either be charged with a recognisable criminal offence or released immediately.”

French authorities in Chad said that the fate of the political opponents was a “priority”. Information is now emerging that French authorities in N'Djamena may have been aware of the arrests of these opposition figures as early as 3 February, and may be aware of their current whereabouts.

“If French authorities have any information regarding the fate or whereabouts of these men, they should reveal it immediately. Under international law, anyone held in custody is entitled to be held in a recognized place of detention and to have access to family, lawyers and doctors, said Hondora.

“The Chadian government should not use the declared state of emergency as a cover to flush out and arrest supporters – actual and perceived – of political opposition parties. Individuals from certain ethnic groups,

such as the Goran, are now fleeing Chad for fear of being arbitrarily arrested and detained.”

Amnesty International is also concerned about the ongoing clampdown on journalists and other members of civil society who are independently reporting on and examining the activities of the Chadian government.

Since the state of emergency was declared throughout the country on 14 February, some private newspapers have ceased to publish to avoid being censored. Many journalists have already fled the country.

“Chadian and international journalists in Chad must be able to carry out their important work free from harassment and censorship,” said Hondora. “Furthermore, civilians of all ethnic groups should be protected from harassment and arbitrary arrest. The repression of civil society bodes ill for the peaceful resolution of the several conflicts ravaging Chad.”

Continuing hostilities between government forces and armed groups and the on-going crackdown by the government of political opponents and human rights defenders is creating waves of refugees and the internally displaced. Eastern Chad is already host to over 250,000 refugees from neighbouring Darfur and about 180,000 internally displaced Chadians.

“The EUFOR force should be speedily deployed to protect civilians, including refugees and internally displaced people in eastern Chad. Pending deployment, EU member countries, especially France, contributing forces to EUFOR should desist from any actions that threaten their perceived neutrality in the on-going conflict in Chad, as this threatens the forces’ ability to implement its mandate to protect civilians,” said Hondora.

Background information

Since early 2000, armed opposition movements have waged low-intensity warfare against the Chadian government. In 2004 President Idriss Deby altered the Chadian constitution, removing the presidential two-term limit, thus enabling him to be re-elected for a third term in 2006.

On 31 January 2008, armed opposition groups launched a major offensive on N’Djamena. Heavy fighting lasted three days. Hundreds of civilian casualties have been reported and thousands of people fled the capital to neighbouring Cameroon. On 14 February, President Deby declared the state of emergency all over the country. This state of emergency gives the governors of provinces the power to take measures to restrict freedom of movement and assembly, to control private and state press and radio media, and to impose a curfew.

The Goran is a non-Arab ethnic group whose members live mainly in northern Chad and Sudan. Mahamat Nouri, one of the leaders of the armed opposition groups that carried out the attacks on government forces in N’Djamena on the 31 January, is a Goran. Others who are from the Goran ethnic group are therefore at risk of being perceived by Chadian authorities as associated with the armed opposition groups.