

EXTERNAL

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EXTRA 100/97

Death penalty

15 July 1997

GAMBIA

Souleyman Sarr
Mballo Kanteh
Essa Baldeh
Omar Dampha

On 25 June 1997, the High Court of the Gambia sentenced to death the above-named four men. They were found guilty of treason for trying to overthrow the government. Amnesty International fears the execution might be carried out shortly after 25 July 1997.

The four men had been arrested after an attack on the Farafenni military camp by an armed group in eastern Gambia, the country's second largest military camp, on 8 November 1996. During the attack, six soldiers died and five were injured.

The prisoners have 30 days to appeal against the conviction. However, two weeks after the trial, Amnesty International has not received any information that they have appealed against their conviction. Amnesty International is therefore concerned that the four men might not be able to appeal within the time limit permitted by law, and could be executed after 25 July, the last date for the submission of their appeal.

After the attack on the Farafenni military camp in November 1996, five men were arrested, the four named above and another man, Yaya Drammeh. Yaya Drammeh died in detention on 25 May after having been briefly treated in a hospital. The circumstances of his death remain unclear. While the government reportedly stated that he died from blood disorder, septicaemia, other reports claim that he might have been tortured.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

After the arrests of the four men, a press conference was held at the Gambia National Armed Forces Headquarters and broadcast on national TV. The arrested men claimed that they had been trained in Libya by Kukoi Samba Sanyang, who tried to overthrow the Gambian government in 1981, and had served in Liberia under faction leader Charles Taylor. Amnesty International is concerned that the public interrogation of the detainees on TV might have prejudiced their case before the actual trial proceedings.

It is possible that the Gambian government will execute the four men in order to set an example for others. Public opinion seems to be in favour of the death penalty for the four men; the government might see this as an opportunity to reinstate the use of the death penalty without provoking protest.

President Jammeh came to power in July 1994 through a military coup and was elected civilian president in September 1996. Although the death penalty had been abolished, the new government reintroduced the death penalty in its new constitution in August 1995. This is the first time a death sentence has been passed since then.

The Gambian security forces have tortured prisoners on several occasions, the last time at the beginning of June 1997 when seven leading members of the opposition party UDP (United Democratic Party) were arrested.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing deep concern about the sentencing to death of Souleyman Sarr, Mballo Kenteh, Essa Baldett and Omar Dampha;
- urging that no executions be carried out, and appealing to the President to commute the death sentences;
- stating that Amnesty International, while acknowledging that the government has a duty to prosecute and convict criminals, is unconditionally opposed to the death penalty in all cases on the grounds that it is the ultimate form of cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment which violates the right to life and which is shown to have no deterrent effect;
- urging the Gambian government to consider suspending executions, with a view to completely abolishing the death penalty, as recommended by the UN Commission for Human Rights in its resolution 1997/12.

APPEALS TO:

His Excellency
Colonel rtd. Yayha Jammeh
President of the Republic of the Gambia and Commander in Chief of the
Gambian Armed Forces
Office of the President
State House
Banjul - The Gambia

Telegrams: President Jammeh, State House, Banjul, Gambia
Faxes : +220 227 034
Salutation: Dear President Jammeh

Mr. Momodou Bojang
Minister of the Interior
Ministry of the Interior
71 Dobson Street
Banjul
Republic of Gambia

Telegrams: Momodou Bojang, Interior Ministry, Banjul, Gambia
Salutation: Dear Captain Lamin Bajo

Mrs. Hawa Ceesay-Sabally
Minister of Justice and Attorney General
Ministry of Justice and Attorney general's Chambers
Marina Parade
Banjul
Republic of the Gambia

Telegrams: Hawa Ceesay-Sabally, Justice Ministry, Banjul, Gambia
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

The Daily Observer, PMB 131, Banjul, Gambia, Fax: + 220 496878
The Gambia Daily, 14 Hagan Street, Banjul, Gambia, Fax: + 220 227230
The Point, 1A Hagan Street, Banjul, Gambia, Fax: +220 497442

and to diplomatic representatives of Gambia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 11 August 1997.