

Guinea: Prisoners of conscience must be released and refugees' rights respected

Amnesty International is calling for the unconditional release of Alpha Condé and other prisoners of conscience who were given prison sentences after an unfair trial before the *Cour de Sûreté de l'Etat* (CSE), a court specially set up to deal with such cases.

“This trial ought never to have taken place. The conviction of Alpha Condé and some of his co-detainees shows just how far the Guinean authorities are determined to go to silence any opposition”, stressed Amnesty International.

On Monday 11 September 2000, at the conclusion of an unfair trial, prisoners of conscience, including Alpha Condé, President of the *Rassemblement pour la Guinée* (RPG), Guinean People's Rally, were found guilty of “constituting a threat to the authority of the state and to territorial integrity”. Around ten of the 47 people tried were given prison sentences of between 18 months and three years, while the remainder were acquitted. Alpha Condé himself, President of the RPG, was given the longest sentence - five years' imprisonment. A candidate in the presidential elections of 14 December 1998, he was arrested the next day in the village of Piné, not far from the border with Côte d'Ivoire.

This verdict follows the arbitrary arrest by the Guinean authorities of several hundred refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia in the capital, Conakry. In a radio broadcast on 9 September, two days before the verdict was given, the President of Guinea accused Alpha Condé of having instigated fighting on the borders with Liberia and Sierra Leone. He also accused the refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia of having passed information to those involved in the fighting, who recently made incursions into Guinea from these two countries.

The President of Guinea called on the security forces to search everywhere so that suspects could be arrested and he urged the international community to “rid” Guinea of its thousands of refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone. In particular, he called on Guinean “civilians and members of the armed forces” to defend “our country together” and added: “Let's crush the invaders”. The day before this speech was made, on 8 September 2000, Guinea's Minister of the Interior, Moussa Solano, accused Alpha Condé's supporters of being involved in a “campaign to destabilize Guinea and its government”.

Amnesty International is appealing to the government of Guinea to protect the fundamental rights of refugees and is urging it to respect the principle of non-refoulement.

Defendants given an unfair trial and subjected to torture

The trial of Alpha Condé and his 47 co-detainees began in mid-April 2000 and ended in September. The defence lawyers withdrew after a few days in court when the CSE rejected their objections. The irregularities related, in particular, to the failure to observe the time-limit for prison

custody and the extraction of confessions under torture. After the collective withdrawal of the defence, the CSE itself automatically allocated lawyers to the defendants.

“This trial was held without any regard for the majority of international standards of fairness”, said Amnesty International, which sent an observer to follow part of the hearings.

Some of the defendants told the Amnesty International delegation that, during their extended period in custody, they had been humiliated, beaten and tortured on a regular basis as a means of extracting confessions and coercing them to implicate Alpha Condé.

One detainee told our delegation that he had been placed in a boat (zodiac) and, once out to sea, had been tied up, after which his torturers had threatened to throw him into the water. Another detainee told us of the death of warrant officer Guey Keïta during the night of 15 January 2000. The evening before his death, he had been subjected to ill-treatment, because his torturers wanted to make him admit to having received money from Alpha Condé.

Other detainees had been held in a cell underneath a water tank. Everyone in the cell was regularly soaked whenever the water overflowed from the tank. In addition, the cramped conditions meant that they had to remain standing all the time.

Refugees’ rights under threat

“Since torture is routine practice in Guinea, we very much fear that, from the very first days of their detention, some of the refugees who have been arrested may be ill-treated”, says Amnesty International which is launching an appeal to the government of Guinea to protect the fundamental rights of refugees. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has condemned these arrests and has obtained the release of some of those arrested.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the declarations of the President of Guinea calling on refugees to go back home; Liberia and Sierra Leone have stated that they will take steps to repatriate nationals of their country. Amnesty International is urging Guinea to enforce the principle of non-refoulement. No refugee should be sent back to their country if there is a possibility that they would be at risk of human rights abuses.

Amnesty International is urging the authorities of Guinea to continue to allow free access to its country for refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia. The organization is calling on the international community to provide the necessary assistance to guarantee the protection of refugees and to respond effectively to their needs.

According to the UNHCR, in Guinea there are 125,000 refugees from Liberia and 330,000 from Sierra Leone, people who have left their own country following conflict between armed opposition groups and the government forces of their country.

General Information

More than sixty members of the RPG were arrested in December 1998 at the time of the presidential election and given prison sentences. Several of these people have told an Amnesty International delegation, sent to carry out an on-the-spot investigation in April 2000, that they had

been tortured in detention and that some women and young girls had also been raped by members of the security forces.

Amnesty International regularly receives information on allegations of torture in Guinea. On numerous occasions Le Hadj Biro Diallo, President of the National Assembly, has condemned the use of torture and ill-treatment to extract confessions. In January 1999, the President of the National Assembly wrote again to the President of the Republic, reiterating his opposition to torture and enclosing a video cassette of victims relating the fact that they had been arrested and showing the injuries they sustained as a result of torture by the security forces.

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