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## **Guinea-Bissau: Sustained attack against freedom of expression**

Amnesty International today expressed concern that freedom of expression is once again under attack in Guinea-Bissau as two journalists face charges of defamation. Other journalists have been detained and harassed in recent months for criticizing government policies or reporting issues deemed sensitive by the authorities.

"Freedom of expression is a fundamental right enshrined in the Guinean Constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Guinea Bissau is a signatory. The government must take immediate steps to end the arbitrary detention and harassment of journalists and to bring those responsible for such abuses to justice," Amnesty International said.

In the latest incident, João de Barros, the owner of *Diário de Bissau*, was arrested at his home on Sunday 17 June 2001, by members of the state security police. The following day, Athizar Mendes, a journalist at *Diário de Bissau*, was arrested at the newspaper premises by members of the state security police.

There were apparently no warrants for the arrests of both men accused of publishing an article criticising the government's mishandling of public funds and corruption. There are also reports that Athizar Mendes' arrest may also be related to an earlier article he wrote about the brief detention of the former chief of the State Security Police earlier in June.

João de Barros and Athizar Mendes were held in the *Serviço de Segurança de Estado* (State Security Department), within the Ministry of Internal Administration (Interior). They were released on bail on 19 June 2001, and are awaiting trial on charges of defamation and slander. These charges are punishable with up to one year's imprisonment or a fine. They have to report to the Bissau regional court every two weeks.

### **Background**

These arrests and harassment are part of a pattern which has developed since the government of President Kumba Ialà came to power in February 2000. Since 2000, and especially in the last few months, journalists have been targets of arbitrary detention and threats. The most recent incidents include:

- On 27 January 2001, Bacar Tchernó Dolé, a journalist on the national radio and the weekly newspaper *No Pintcha*, was arrested and held without charge for two days for reporting an attack by Casamançais rebels on the São Domingos area of Guinea-Bissau, along the border with the southern Senegalese province of Casamance. He was arrested by police and military officers who intimidated him at the time of the arrest and during his interrogation.

- On 15 February, Athizar Mendes, a photographer and a driver of *Diário de Bissau* were detained for 24 hours and had their cameras confiscated. They had gone to the headquarters

of the state police where several members of the Guinea-Bissau diplomatic corps were being held with a view to write an article about their detention.

- On 14 March, Adolfo Palma the correspondent of the Portuguese news agency *Lusa* faced charges of defamation brought by a member of the Presidential office. He had reported the arrest of four people on 17 February 2001, on suspicion of allegedly plotting to overthrow the government. The member of the Presidency alleged that only three people had been arrested. He had not been tried.

- In early March, during a press conference the vice-Procurator General advised journalists to practise "self-censorship". This followed debates in the Guinea-Bissau media about events in November 2000 which resulted in the death of General Ansumane Mané, in disputed circumstances, whom the government accused of plotting to overthrow the state. However, and the arrest of hundreds of military officers and some civil politicians accused of plotting with General Ansumane Mané to overthrow the government. However, of more than 200 armed forces officers and politicians arrested at that time, none has been charged with any offence and about 25 officers remain in detention without charge or trial.

- On 30 March, a live debate on *Radio Bombolom* on the events of November 2000 and the armed conflict of 1998-99, was interrupted half way through by a senior military officer. He was reported to have accused *Radio Bombolom* of fomenting instability and war and threatened to bomb the radio in the event of future conflict.

These attacks on freedom of expression seem to indicate the failure of the government to keep its promises to protect and promote human rights, including freedom of expression, a fundamental right.

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