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PUBLIC STATEMENT

TANZANIA

Zanzibar opposition leader may be arrested on fabricated treason charges

Amnesty International fears that the Zanzibar Attorney General's order to Seif Sharif Hamad, vice-chairperson of the Zanzibar opposition Civic United Front (CUF) party, to report to the police tomorrow may land him in prison on a fabricated treason charge.

The letter, which gave no explanation, warned that if he did not attend he would "face the consequences". He is a former Chief Minister of Zanzibar and had been previously imprisoned as a prisoner of conscience from 1989 to 1991 on a sedition charge which was finally withdrawn in 1993.

Amnesty International is already appealing to the Zanzibar authorities for the unconditional release of 18 other officials and members or supporters of the Civic United Front (CUF) who were arrested in Zanzibar between November 1997 and May 1998 and charged with treason. The organization considers them to be prisoners of conscience imprisoned solely on account of their non-violent opinions and political activities and is calling on the Zanzibar government to release them unconditionally.

They are due to appear again in a magistrate's court on the same day, 9 July, as Seif Sharif Hamad has to report to the police. Amnesty International is appealing for him not to be imprisoned too as a prisoner of conscience.

The Zanzibar authorities have not specified the grounds for the charges of treason, which carry a mandatory death penalty, and the lower court magistrate has continually granted prosecution requests for further time to investigate. The police said recently they were looking for more treason suspects, including some living abroad. The defendants could not expect to receive a fair trial in Zanzibar, though they would have the right of appeal to a higher Tanzanian court in Dar es Salaam.

Amnesty International is also appealing to Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa in this important case affecting human rights in the United Republic of Tanzania including the semi-autonomous Zanzibar islands.

Background

Both the Commonwealth and UN Secretary Generals have been seeking to mediate between the Zanzibar government and the CUF in a political crisis in Zanzibar arising out of the disputed 1995 multi-party elections. CUF, which won many parliamentary seats but failed to gain the presidency as a result of a rigged vote, does not recognize the Zanzibar government. The western donor countries have also refused contact with Zanzibar President Salmin Amour.

The 18 CUF members held on treason charges include four members of the Zanzibar House of Representatives (parliament) --Juma Duni Haji, a former Tanzania vice-presidential candidate, Hamad Masoud Hamad, director of the CUF human rights committee, Soud Yusuf Mgeni, former deputy Chief Minister of Zanzibar, and Hamad Rashid Mohameed, former Tanzania Deputy Finance Minister --and two women, Zulekha Ahmed Mohamed, who is ill with diabetes, hyper-tension and a suspected femoral hernia and not allowed hospital admission, and Zeina Juma Mohamed. They are held in harsh conditions of imprisonment, although allowed brief fortnightly visits and daily food from their families.

Since 1995, there have been frequent short-term arrests and harassment of CUF leaders and ordinary CUF members in Zanzibar and particularly on Pemba island. Many CUF supporters have been ill-treated or tortured (particularly in 1996), dismissed from government employment and prevented from voting in bye-elections.

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