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Togo: One year of systematic silencing of those who speak out for human rights worsens as OAU summit approaches

As the OAU July Summit to be held in Togo approaches, the government's pledge to human rights remains rhetorical as long as attacks against human rights activists and independent media continue, Amnesty International said today.

Since Amnesty International published a report on Togo one year ago* at least twenty-five human rights activists, including trade unionists, student leaders, and independent journalists, have been arbitrarily arrested or forced to flee by the Togolese authorities. Some of them were tortured while in detention.

"Independent journalists -- who play a key role in investigating and exposing human rights violations committed by the Togolese security forces -- have become the targets of the latest clampdown by the Togolese authorities," Amnesty International said.

In just the last three weeks, Hippolyte Agboh, director of an independent Togolese weekly paper, *l'Exilé*, was imprisoned and Lucien Messan, director of *Le Combat du Peuple*, was forced into hiding to escape arrest. Other journalists, including Roland Kpagli Comlan, director of *L'Aurore*, and Vigno Koffi Hounkanly, director of *Crocodile*, went into hiding due to a well-founded fear of persecution.

Amnesty International is concerned that detention for press offences such as 'spreading false information' is regularly used by the Togolese authorities against independent journalists. The organization believes that the detention and search for these journalists is politically motivated and is linked to their critical scrutiny of the Togolese government.

Independent media have also recently reported on a United Nations report, issued in March 2000, which strongly condemns President Eyadema for violating UN sanctions against the Angolan armed opposition group, UNITA.

"The Togolese government should immediately and unconditionally release Hippolyte Agboh and stop pursuing others, such as Lucien Messan, Roland Kpagli Comlan and Vigno Koffi Hounkanly," Amnesty International said.

Two leaders of a students' organization the *Conseil des Etudiants de l'Université du Benin* - CEUB - (Council of the University of Benin), Koumoyi Kpelafia and Hanif Tchadjobo, were arbitrarily arrested on 3 and 10 April 2000 respectively. They have been detained in the civil prison of Lomé on criminal charges. Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience. The other leaders of the organization are in hiding or have fled the country.

Amnesty International urges the Togolese government to immediately and unconditionally release these students. The organization believes that their detention is an attempt by the Togolese authorities to put an end to students' protests by silencing the leading members of CEUB.

"The Togolese government's systematic attempts to silence those who speak out about human rights is not a good start to the international commission of enquiry," concluded Amnesty International. The international commission of enquiry, to investigate human rights violations in Togo, should be established this year by the UN and the OAU.

Background:

*On 5 May 1999 AI published a report entitled *Togo: Rule of terror*, based on the findings of a fact-finding visit to Togo in November and December 1998. The report described a persistent pattern of extrajudicial executions, "disappearances", arbitrary arrests and detentions followed by torture and ill-treatment, sometimes leading to death, and harsh conditions of detention which amounted to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. In particular it alleged that hundreds of people had been killed by the security forces around the time of the June 1998 elections and that bodies had been dumped at sea by military aircraft. By July independent journalists and another human rights organization, the *Ligue pour la défense des droits de l'homme*, League for Human Rights, based in Benin had corroborated AI's findings.

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For more information or to obtain a list of the human rights activists persecuted by the Togolese government, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on 44 20 7413 5808, or on international mobile 44 7778 472 119, or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>