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Equatorial Guinea: Ethnic Bubi prisoners face uncertain future after prison transfer

The transfer of some 50 ethnic Bubi prisoners from the capital of Equatorial Guinea, Malabo, to an unknown destination is likely to further endanger their physical and mental well-being, which in some cases is already critical, Amnesty International said today.

The prisoners, including many prisoners of conscience, -- who were detained at the beginning of 1998 and sentenced to prison terms in May after an unfair military trial for alleged involvement in attacks on government military barracks -- were transferred by boat, on 3 March 2000, from their prison in Malabo, on Bioko Island, to the continental region of the country. No official confirmation of their whereabouts has yet been given but eyewitnesses are reported to have seen them in Evinayong prison, some 500 Kilometres east of Malabo.

"Many of the prisoners' mothers, wives and other relatives are in a state of complete despair as rumours circulate about the whereabouts and fate of the prisoners," Amnesty International said.

During their two years' detention in Malabo, many of the prisoners were in extremely poor health and nearly all of them were suffering from injuries resulting from the severe torture they received during their first weeks of detention. They were held in severely overcrowded cells and were denied adequate medical treatment and sufficient food. Many prisoners only survived with the help of relatives bringing food and medicine.

"The transfer away from the Malabo makes it much more difficult for the families to bring medicine, food and moral support to the prisoners," Amnesty International said.

"Eight prisoners have already died as a result of torture and lack of medical care. This figure could increase rapidly unless the authorities urgently attend to medical needs and provide sufficient food," the organization added.

In particular, Amnesty International has received information about several prisoners whose conditions are poor:

- **Gregorio Bomuagasi Oraca** (age 57) had his jaw broken by the police at the time of his arrest in January 1998. As a result his teeth began to fall out. He was finally sent to a doctor on the eve of the transfer, but his family had no time to buy him the prescribed medicine.
- **Emilio Ribas** (age 70) is suffering from an inflammation of the testicles as a result of being tortured. After months of not receiving adequate medical treatment he was finally sent to hospital for an operation. However, he was sent back to jail after two weeks despite the fact that the doctor said that he need more time to recover. Consequently, shortly afterwards he had to return to the hospital for further treatment.
- **Leoncio Kota Ripala** has sight problems after being forced to remain all day in a dark cell for one year, together with some other ten prisoners who were also sentenced to death in 1998. Their death

sentences were commuted to life imprisonment but the prisoners were not allowed to leave their cells for more than one hour a day. Leoncio Kota Ripala's family brought him medicine for his eye condition but the treatment had not finished before the transfer occurred.

- **Milagrosa Cheba**, a young woman, was severely tortured at the time of her arrest She was sent to hospital on several occasions but each time she was returned to prison before she fully recovered.

Amnesty International calls the authorities to confirm officially the place of detention of the displaced Bubi prisoners and take all the measures to ensure they receive adequate food and medical care.

The organization also reiterates its call to the government to allow human rights groups and international humanitarian organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, access to the prisoners.

Background

In May 1998 more than 110 people accused of involvement in attacks on military barracks were tried by a military court. The court sentenced 15 people to death (including four in absentia), and some 70 people to prison terms ranging from six to 26 years. Many defendants, predominantly members of the Bubi ethnic group, appear to have been detained solely because of their ethnic origin. Many had been forced to make statements under torture.

An Amnesty International delegation attending the trial noticed that a number of defendants showed signs of torture. At least six died as a result during the pre-trial detention and two others died after the May 1998 trial. Since the sentences were passed, several prisoners have fallen ill as a result of the harsh prison conditions. Most have been denied medical care. One prisoner, Martin Puye, aged 58, a leader of the *Movimiento para la Auto-determinación de la Isla de Bioko* (MAIB), Movement for the Self-determination of Bioko Island, died in hospital in July 1999, reportedly as a result of ill-treatment and lack of adequate medical care. Another detainee, Digno Sepa Tobachi, "Elako", died in October 1999 as a result of torture and lack of medical care.

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