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Togo: Human rights must be at the heart of the political debate

In the run-up to legislative elections scheduled for 10 and 22 March 2002, Amnesty International today called on all political parties in Togo to publicly commit themselves to safeguarding the human rights of all Togolese as guaranteed by international human rights law and the Togolese Constitution.

“Human rights are central to Togo's future political, economic and social development,” the organization said on launching the *‘Human Rights Manifesto for Togo’*.

This manifesto is an appeal to all the candidates and parties to pledge themselves, if they win the elections, to take concrete and specific steps to ensure every Togolese the right to live in a society where basic rights are respected in law and in practice.

The consistent reports about restrictions to freedom of expression and assembly, violence against members of political parties, inhuman and cruel prison conditions and widespread impunity are of great concern to Amnesty International at this period.

“Togo will elect a new legislature in March. This election will not simply determine who governs the country but will provide the people of Togo with the opportunity to tell their political leaders what kind of society they want to live in,” Amnesty International said. “The conduct of the elections will also have an important impact on Togo's international reputation, including on foreign aid which was suspended in 1993, after elections were marred by irregularities and human rights abuses.”

The manifesto addresses a range of areas which continue to be of concern in Togo.

Despite legal obligations under regional and international human rights treaties and the Togolese Constitution, opposition parties, human rights groups, journalists and other members of civil society face restrictions on their rights to freedom of expression and association.

Hundreds of civilians and military personnel have been victims of extrajudicial executions over the last decade. The suspected perpetrators of these abuses enjoy total impunity. The Togolese government is yet to open an independent, impartial and effective inquiry to shed light on past abuses, especially the massacres of 1991, 1993, 1994 and 1998.

Torture and ill-treatment continue to be practiced in police custody, prisons, and other places of detention such as military barracks. Several detainees have reportedly died as a result of ill-treatment in the past decade.

Conditions in many prisons and detention centres are life-threatening and amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Overcrowding, poor diet, appalling sanitary conditions, improper sleeping arrangements and inadequate ventilation contribute to the spread infectious diseases.

The Togolese government has repeatedly promised to respect human rights and has signed and ratified a number of international human rights treaties. Yet, the reality is that both law and practice continue to contravene these legally binding standards.

The organization is calling on the Togolese government to ensure that the necessary enforcement of law and order be exercised in conformity with international standards on law enforcement, and that nobody will be arrested for peacefully expressing their political opinions.

“It takes a wholehearted commitment by those in power to protect human rights”, Amnesty International and the supporting organizations said. “All those who seek to govern Togo should now commit themselves publicly to making human rights a reality for all Togolese.”

Background

Following the contested results of the 1999 boycotted by the opposition, the Togolese authorities, as a result of international pressure, agreed to dissolve the National Assembly and to organise new elections in March 2000. Despite the presence of facilitators from France, Germany, the EU and the Francophonie who have, since 1998, been mediating in the political crisis, obstructions and delays due to political differences have undermined the holding of the ballot. The *Commission électorale nationale indépendante (CENI)*, National Independent Electoral Commission, finally announced in January 2001 that the elections would be held in October. However, in early October the CENI announced another postponement to March 2002.

The manifesto is located on the website at :<http://www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/afr570152001>
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