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AI Index: AFR 19/002/2008

28 February 2008

Further Information on UA 30/08 (AFR 19/001/2008, 30 January 2008) Unfair trial/ prisoner of conscience

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC Faustin Bambou (m), journalist

Amnesty International has learnt that journalist Faustin Bambou was released on 23 February 2008. His release followed an announcement on the government radio that he had been pardoned by President François Bozizé.

After an unfair trial that began on 21 January 2008, Faustin Bambou was sentenced on 28 January to six months' imprisonment and a symbolic fine of one CFA Franc (a Central African currency used in six countries; one CFA Franc is equivalent to 0.2 US cents) by the High Court (*Tribunal de grande instance*). Amnesty International believes that Faustin Bambou was a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned for exercising his right to freedom of speech in pursuit of his professional activities.

Faustin Bambou was arrested by gendarmes on 11 January and detained at the Gendarmerie's Research and Investigation Department (*Section de recherche et d'investigation*, SRI) before being transferred to Ngaragba prison in the capital, Bangui. He was charged with inciting revolt, insult and slander (*incitation à la révolte, d'injures et de diffamation*). The charges relate to an article published on 21 December 2007 by his newspaper, *Les Collines de l'Oubangui*, alleging that two government ministers had embezzled funds that could have been used to pay government employees' salary arrears.

When he began his trial on 21 January, his defence team withdrew from the case in protest at the trial judge's refusal to accept their submissions that the prosecution were abusing legal procedure. The team had argued that Faustin Bambou should have been charged under the provisions of the 2004 press law (which protects journalists from being imprisoned for activities related to their work) and not under ordinary criminal law. The trial proceeded without Faustin Bambou being given an opportunity to appoint or being offered alternative legal counsel. Faustin Bambou's lawyers have withdrawn his appeal against his conviction and sentence.

No further action is requested. Many thanks to those who sent appeals.