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Togo: Authorities must guarantee the right to demonstrate before the elections

Togolese authorities must ensure that freedoms of assembly and expression are respected in the run-up to presidential elections, due on 25 April. They must also ensure that excessive use of force, like that which was seen last month, is not tolerated under any circumstance, Amnesty International said today.

New information obtained by Amnesty International shows that gendarmes and military fired live bullets at protesters on 25 March at a rally in the city of Gleï, 160 km north of the capital Lomé. At least 30 people were wounded including a woman and a child; twenty people were also arrested. A number of the demonstrators were reportedly subjected to ill-treatment during their transfer to the prison in Lomé. A man was also reported to have died one day after being released.

"The fact that security forces fired indiscriminately upon demonstrators with live ammunition constitutes an excessive, scandalous and unacceptable use of force," said François Patuel, Amnesty International West Africa researcher.

"Even if the protests were not directly related to the elections, the violence tainting the pre-electoral period in Togo demonstrates the need to respect people's right to assemble and to express themselves freely. The perpetrators of these violations must be identified and brought to justice. "

On 25 March, gendarmes and soldiers charged at a crowd of one hundred students, shooting real bullets, punching several people, kicking them and hitting their legs, heads and arms with batons (matraques). Students had gathered spontaneously to protest against exams being held despite interruptions in their classes and curriculum caused by social movements in the country. They were joined by other students and teachers.

The army was called in as reinforcement when a group of demonstrators threw stones at the gendarmes, injuring several members of security forces. The gendarmes and military pursued those fleeing the scene to different houses and shops, wounding several of those inside during the assaults.

"I was in the room with my sister when, around 1pm, a soldier broke down the door and beat us. A soldier beat me whilst the others beat my sister. Then they arrested us," one victim said to Amnesty International.

Many of the testimonies received by Amnesty International indicate that the police and army fired live ammunition with automatic rifles and shotguns at a crowd of several hundred people, including people peacefully demonstrating and others who

were simply at the scene. An Amnesty International delegation spoke with several victims and their relatives, and visited those arrested during the demonstration, including at the Atakpamé prison in the north of the country.

The government has underestimated the number of injured persons

The government released an official statement stating that 23 persons had minor injuries. However, based on the testimonies gathered by Amnesty International, as well as based on victims' medical treatment forms and booklets, it appears that at least around thirty people were injured, including a child of around ten years old who was shot in the left shoulder and a blind 71 year-old woman, who was beaten by security forces who burst into her home.

Twenty people, including eight students aged 16 to 22 years, were arrested. They told Amnesty International that they had been ill-treated during their transfer to the Atakpamé prison, that they were not informed of the charges held against them and did not have access to a lawyer. Their families were only informed of their detention several days after their arrest. Seven people were released on 31 March and the others on 15 April.

The detainees' families were able to see those held in detention in the Atakpamé prison and see the wounds, contusions and bruises all over their bodies. Some said that their family members had severe head aches and were also vomiting. Despite the requests made by these families to prison authorities, the prisoners did not receive adequate medical treatment.

Authorities must conduct a thorough investigation into the circumstances of one person's death

The father of a family of five children, who was arrested during the protests, died on the night of 16 to 17 April, the day after his release from prison. His family told Amnesty International that the prison authorities had refused to provide him with adequate care and to give him the medicine brought by his family. His family said that he did not take part in the protests.

"Very regrettably, conditions of detention in Togo do not meet international standards and regularly seem to be the cause of deaths. The absence or late provision of medical care continues to endanger prisoners' lives," said François Patuel.

"The increasing restrictions on freedom of expression in this pre-election period in Togo reveal shocking flaws in the overall human rights record in the country. As the elections approach, the authorities must give clear instructions to security forces to only use force as a last resort and when this is made strictly necessary by circumstances. They must also instruct officers to refrain, in every instance, from excessive use of force."

Further information

Over the past few weeks, Togo has been in the grip of social movements following the failure of negotiations between the government and unions regarding a series of social demands. Several protests organised by the Synergy of Togolese Workers (Synergie des Travailleurs du Togo, STT), a group of affiliated trade unions in Lomé (the capital) and in the cities of Kara and Dapaong (north), were banned. These protests had various objectives, but all of the organisers wanted to use the election period as an

opportunity to challenge public opinion, and also the authorities, before the presidential elections of 25 April 2015.

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