
Human rights abuses in Nigeria continue

In spite of political changes after the coming to power of the new military government headed by General Abdulsalami Abubakar in 1998 the situation of human rights in Nigeria has not essentially improved. Members of civil society organizations --some of them involved in environmental causes-- are frequently victims of abuses by military and police corps. The situation of jailed Nigerian environmentalists and Human Rights activists has provoked grave concern worldwide since the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa in November 1995 in relation to the struggle of the Ogoni people for the defense of their territory against Shell.

On 4 and 23 March 1999 the Nigerian military government announced the release of most of the remaining political prisoners. They included at least 39 prisoners of conscience and possible prisoners of conscience held in connection with alleged coup plots. Those who recovered their freedom have corroborated reports by prisoners released earlier and by former government officials that the alleged coup plot was a government fabrication used to imprison influential government critics, journalists and other human rights defenders. Severe cases of torture have been also denounced.

The process has not a clear positive trend. Three environmental activists --Mr Sagbama Owei Okpo, Mr Akpobarelo Didiya and Mr Sea Mum Kuku-- have been in police detention since last March 20. Their supposed "crime" was to have public documents with them. All three are being held in solitary confinement in the cells of the State Investigation and Interrogation Bureau (SIIB) at Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. Access to family and friends is denied, as well as that of medical assistance even if their health situation is deteriorating. It has also been denounced that they were subjected to torture, ill-treatment and humiliation while imprisoned.

To the former can be added that the government has not revoked the State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree, No. 2 of 1984, which allows indefinite detention without charge or trial of those deemed to have threatened the security or the economy of the state. No answer has been given to the questions raised by victims of human rights violations and human rights defenders about responsibility for the deaths in custody of political prisoners and for political killings suspected of being extrajudicial executions by government forces.

Sources: Environmental Rights Action (ERA), eraction@infoweb.abs.net, 28/3/99; Global Response, globresponse@igc.org, 2/4/99, based on an Amnesty International Report dated 31/3/99.