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GAMBIA: NO COMPROMISE ON HUMAN RIGHTS: INTERGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS HAVE A SIGNIFICANT ROLE TO PLAY IN HELPING THE GAMBIAN PEOPLE SECURE THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS

As "Freedom Day" in the Gambia is marked today, Amnesty International, the Campaign for Human Rights in the Gambia (CHRG) and Coalition for Change – The Gambia (CCG) expressed serious concerns about the dire human rights situation in the country. The organizations called on the Gambian authorities to end their repression of journalists and human rights defenders and urged the international community to strengthen their efforts to improve the human rights situation in the Gambia.

22 July is "Freedom Day" in the Gambia, celebrated since President Yahya Jammeh came into power in 1994. However, there is no freedom in the Gambia. Instead, the government has for many years violated the human rights of the Gambian people with absolute impunity. Any criticism of the government's policies or behaviour is repressed by the Gambia's abusive security forces.

In August 2012, the government unlawfully executed nine death row prisoners. Imam Baba Leigh spoke out against the executions and was detained incommunicado and without charge for more than five months. This response is typical of the government's almost complete disregard for the human rights of the Gambian people, including freedom of expression. In 2012 the government closed two independent newspapers and a radio station without explanation. Journalists are frequently arrested without charge and several journalists have had their passports confiscated for prolonged periods and without justification. This prevents them from travelling abroad for work or human rights training. Other journalists have received anonymous death threats. In these circumstances, a climate of fear pervades public life.

Earlier this month, the government moved to limit freedom of expression on the internet, one of the few remaining public spaces for dissent. The Information and Communication (Amendment) Act 2013, passed on 3 July 2013, allows the government to impose penalties of up to 15 years imprisonment and hefty fines for criticising government officials online. The government has again made clear that it will not tolerate dissent.

The Gambian authorities continue to disregard decisions and recommendations on their human rights obligations made by international bodies.

In recent years the Gambia has twice been brought before the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice to answer for the alleged arrest, disappearance and torture of journalists. In 2008 the Court ordered the government to release disappeared journalist Ebrima Manneh, who has not been heard from since his arrest in 2006. The Court found the Gambian government to have violated its legal and human rights obligations, but the government has persistently failed to comply with the Court's judgment. The government is yet to adequately investigate his disappearance and has refused to account for his whereabouts. Further, in 2010 the Court found that the government illegally detained and tortured journalist Musa Saidykhan in 2006. The government has refused to pay him compensation as ordered by the Court.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) during its 44th Ordinary Session held in November 2008 in Abuja, Nigeria, passed a resolution condemning human rights violations in the Gambia. The resolution called on the government to investigate allegations of torture and extrajudicial executions, end the harassment and intimidation of journalists, comply with the ECOWAS Court's decisions and

uphold human rights in the Gambia. The government has not implemented this resolution and the human rights situation has only deteriorated further.

The organizations call on Economic Community of West African States, the African Union and the European Union to be more decisive and put pressure on the Gambian authorities to implement in good faith their human rights obligations and commitments.

We urge the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government to exercise its authority to enforce its Court's decisions by ensuring the Gambia conducts a full investigation into the cases of Ebrima Manneh and Musa Saïdykhan and pays adequate compensation, as ordered by the ECOWAS Court, for the violations of their human rights.

We also urge the African Union to be more proactive to ensure the ACHPR's resolutions and recommendations are effectively implemented.

Following the resumption of political dialogue between the European Union (EU) and the Gambia in July 2013, we welcome the inclusion of human rights issues in the dialogue and urge the EU to continue to ask the government for concrete improvements in the Gambia's human rights record.

Signed:

Amnesty International

Campaign for Human Rights in the Gambia (CHRG)

Coalition for Change – The Gambia (CCG)