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Republic of Benin

Head of state and government: **Patrice Athanase Guillaume Talon (replaced Thomas Boni Yayi in March)**

The authorities continued to restrict the rights to peaceful assembly and expression. Excessive force was used against peaceful demonstrators, causing at least one death. Prisons remained overcrowded.

BACKGROUND

Patrice Talon was elected President in March. Benin became the eighth AU member state to allow NGOs and individuals direct access to the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights.

FREEDOMS OF ASSEMBLY AND EXPRESSION

The authorities continued to arbitrarily restrict the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, including by banning several opposition group demonstrations, taking retaliatory measures against organizers of peaceful demonstrations, and using excessive and arbitrary force against protesters.

In the context of the presidential elections, in January and February the authorities banned at least three peaceful demonstrations by opposition groups. Supporters of the ruling party were able to hold demonstrations.

In February, the authorities banned a demonstration by human rights groups to protest against the unlawful killing of a member of the military.

In March, security forces shot and killed one man and injured nine other people, including two children, at a demonstration in Bantè (Collines department). According to eyewitnesses, the demonstration was largely peaceful until the security forces started firing at the crowd with tear gas and live ammunition.

In July, the security forces used tear gas and batons to disperse a peaceful demonstration by students in Cotonou, injuring at least 20 people. At least nine students were arrested following the demonstrations and detained for several weeks before being released. Twenty-one students presumed to have participated were banned from registering at the university for five years. In August, the university decided to invalidate the academic year for all the students in the faculty where most demonstrators were studying. In October, the Council of Ministers banned all activities by student associations on campuses.

In November, the High Authority of Audiovisual Communication made the arbitrary decision to close seven private media outlets.

UNLAWFUL KILLINGS

In January, Corporal Mohamed Dangou was shot dead by a member of the security services in a military camp in Cotonou. According to an eyewitness he was unarmed. Mohamed Dangou was due to be arrested as part of an investigation into a protest held with other military personnel serving in Côte d'Ivoire calling for the payment of allowances. In July, the Constitutional Court ruled that the armed forces had violated Mohamed Dangou's right to life.

PRISON CONDITIONS

The UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture made an unannounced visit to Benin in January. It concluded that detention centres were "overcrowded and lacked adequate staffing and other resources". As of September, Cotonou prison held 1,137 detainees, despite a maximum capacity of 500.

In June, the National Assembly adopted a law on community service which could be used to reduce prison overcrowding by replacing detention with non-custodial sentences.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

In February, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued its concluding observations on Benin, expressing concerns about the infanticide of children born with disabilities and the persistence of harmful practices, including the rise of female genital mutilation and early and forced marriage. The Committee highlighted the high rates of girls dying from illegal abortion and urged that girls' rights to education, information and access to quality contraceptive products be guaranteed.

DEATH PENALTY

In January, the Constitutional Court abolished the death penalty in a ruling stating that "no one can now be sentenced to capital punishment". The government had yet to adopt laws removing the death penalty from national legislation.

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