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Guinea

In 2006 Guinea traversed a time of uncertainty tied to economic turmoil and impending political transition. Guinea's economy is very poor, with inflation currently running at 40 percent, placing basic foodstuffs and other essential commodities out of the reach of many Guineans. Guinea's president, Lansana Conté, age 72, is rumored to be gravely ill and made two trips to Switzerland for medical care. Guinea's military is thought to be deeply divided along both generational and ethnic lines. Many observers believe that a military takeover is inevitable in the likely event that President Conté does not finish out his term, set to expire in 2010. In 2006 Guinea's two largest trade unions emerged as significant players in Guinea's political future by organizing two nationwide strikes that effectively paralyzed the country for several weeks.

During 2006 Guinean citizens were subjected to numerous forms of brutality, including excessive use of force on unarmed demonstrators, torture, assault, and theft by the security forces responsible for protecting them. Throughout 2006 Guinean police regularly subjected criminal suspects to torture and ill-treatment to extract confessions. Once individuals are transferred from police custody to prison to await trial, many are left to languish for years in cramped cells where they face hunger, disease, and sometimes death. In addition, Guinean security forces responded to strikes organized to protest worsening economic conditions with inappropriate and excessive use of force against unarmed demonstrators. The government has largely failed to tackle the impunity that often attaches to serious human rights abuses, particularly abuses committed by security forces.

As Guinea slides deeper and deeper into economic and political chaos, Guinean civil society, once thought to be a weak voice for political change, has increasingly demonstrated its capacity to organize on a wide scale to press for political and economic reforms. In March 2006, the majority of prominent Guinean civil society organizations and opposition parties united to organize a four-day "national consultation" in an effort to press the government for major political reforms. The

event was significant in that despite Guinea's repressive history, the conference was held without incidents of government violence or harassment.

Excessive Use of Force against Unarmed Demonstrators

In 2006, as in previous years, excessive use of force against unarmed demonstrators constituted a significant impediment to the ability of Guinean citizens to exercise their rights to freedom of speech and of assembly. During 2006 Guinean security forces were responsible for at least two such incidents during which scores of unarmed demonstrators were wounded by gunshot, beaten, and arbitrarily arrested. The most serious incident occurred in June 2006 when Guinean security forces responded to a strike to protest increases in basic commodity prices with excessive and inappropriate use of force, killing at least 11 demonstrators. In the course of the crackdown, police and other security forces were involved in rape, assault, and theft, victimizing not only the protesters, but many others including women, children, and elderly men who had not participated in the protests. Though investigations are reportedly underway, no one has yet been brought to justice for these crimes. Security forces responsible for previous incidents remain similarly unaccountable.

Police Torture

Torture and ill-treatment of criminal suspects, including children, during police custody is routine. During police interrogation, individuals are frequently bound with cords, beaten, burned with cigarettes, and cut with razor blades until they agree to confess to the crime of which they are accused. Many of the torture techniques used during police interrogation date back to the brutal and repressive dictatorship under Guinea's first president, Sékou Touré (1958-1984). Impunity from prosecution remains the biggest single obstacle to ending these abuses.

Prolonged Pretrial Detention

In 2006, as in previous years, prolonged pre-trial detention was a serious human rights issue. In Guinea's largest prison in central Conakry, 70 to 80 percent of incarcerated individuals are untried. Many of these individuals, including children, have spent more than two years without trial. Some have spent more than four years in pre-trial detention. In some cases individuals have spent more time awaiting trial

than the maximum sentence for the crime of which they are accused. In violation of international standards, prison officials often fail to separate convicted and untried prisoners, as well as child and adult detainees. In late 2006 the Guinean Ministry of Justice held a conference attended by Guinean judges to discuss ways to address the problem. The Embassy of the United States of America also provided funding to a local prisoner's advocacy organization to help address the problem.

Rule of Law

The judicial system in Guinea is plagued with striking deficiencies, including lack of independence of the judicial branch from the executive, inadequate resources, corrupt practices, inadequate training for magistrates and other judicial authorities, and insufficient numbers of attorneys, especially those specializing in criminal law. As a result of corruption, individuals are regularly denied access to justice due to their inability to pay bribes to judges, magistrates, and other officials working in the judicial and penal sectors.

Inadequate Detention Conditions

Detention conditions throughout Guinea are completely inadequate. Severe overcrowding is the most basic and most chronic problem. Guinea's largest prison has in recent years housed close to 1,500 prisoners in a facility designed for 240-300 individuals. Food and nutrition are grossly insufficient, and several deaths due to malnutrition occurred in 2006, though they have decreased from previous years. Many prison guards serve on a "volunteer" basis with no pay from the government, and consequently resort to extorting money from prisoners, or selling them drugs, to make money.

Key International Actors

Guinea has a proud tradition of defiance of the international community, dating back to its independence from France in 1958, which has historically resulted in a resistance to outside influences. In recent years, possibly owing to the continuing economic crisis, the government has appeared increasingly open to reforms relating to good governance and human rights. However, the willingness of Guinea's multilateral and bilateral donors to use this opening to seek improvements in the human rights situation in Guinea has been mixed. After a brutal crackdown on

demonstrators in June 2006, the African Union Commission Chairperson, the Presidency of the European Union (EU), and the United Nations Secretary-General all issued statements expressing concern at the violence and deaths involved. The United States, however, failed to issue such a public statement. In 2004, the EU invoked Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement to suspend development assistance to Guinea due to human rights concerns. In the course of subsequent consultations with the EU, the Government of Guinea undertook to implement electoral reforms and allow for private ownership of television and radio stations, among other steps. Though Guinea's success in implementing these reforms has varied, in 2006 the first licenses for privately owned radio stations were granted and the first stations began transmitting. Partly in response to these and other reforms, the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid in October 2006 signaled that the EU could soon unblock development assistance. Development assistance from major bilateral donors such as the United States has not been similarly conditioned.

A more consistent approach on the part of international actors to helping Guinea tackle its human rights problems, including impunity, and, in particular, focused efforts by key bilateral donors such as France and the United States, would help to curb the most egregious abuses. Increasing competition for Guinea's vast natural resources, including bauxite, gold, diamonds, iron, and, in future years, oil, may present one obstacle to such an approach in the years to come.