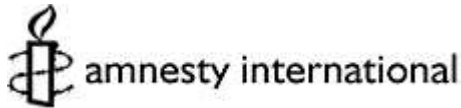


Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	207
Land:	Elfenbenskysten
Kilde:	Amnesty International
Titel:	Côte d'Ivoire: Authorities must stop arbitrary arrests and 'mobile detention' of opposition supporters ahead of referendum
Udgivet:	28. oktober 2016
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	18. januar 2017



Côte d'Ivoire: Authorities must stop arbitrary arrests and 'mobile detention' of opposition supporters ahead of referendum

Publisher [Amnesty International](#)

Publication Date 28 October 2016

Cite as Amnesty International, *Côte d'Ivoire: Authorities must stop arbitrary arrests and 'mobile detention' of opposition supporters ahead of referendum*, 28 October 2016, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5825e3a04.html> [accessed 15 December 2016]

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Authorities in Côte d'Ivoire must stop targeting opposition members by curtailing their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, Amnesty International said ahead of Sunday's referendum on constitutional changes.

On 20 October, at least 50 opposition members were arbitrarily arrested at a peaceful protest and detained for hours in moving police vehicles. Some of them were dropped in several places in the main city Abidjan, others around 100 km away from their homes and forced to walk back in a practice known as "mobile detention".

"This form of inhumane treatment is at odds with international and regional human rights law and standards. Whether people campaign 'yes' or 'no' for the referendum, everyone, including opposition members, has the right to peacefully express their opinion and to have their dignity respected at all times. Members of the security forces responsible for this must be identified and held to account," said Gaëtan Mootoo, Amnesty International's West Africa researcher.

"Côte d'Ivoire needs to focus on creating a safe and enabling environment in which all voices can be heard. By unduly restricting the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly of mainly opposition members and other dissenting voices, the authorities are failing to be on the right track."

On 20 October, as anti-referendum protesters started to gather, police fired tear gas, clubbed the leaders and arrested at least 50 people.

An opposition leader who escaped to the arrest told Amnesty International:

"Security forces seized the cell phones of those arrested and loaded them in police vehicles that have circulated for hours throughout the city and outside Abidjan. After hours, they told them they

were released but clearly indicated that since they wanted to protest they only had to walk all the way from there to the city. They called the practice 'mobile detention'."

Amnesty International urges the authorities to stop this practice of arbitrary detention and calls on them to ensure that opposition members can freely express their views.

Those who are still in detention solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights, must be released, including Tahouri Wase Marius, who was arrested after the 20 October protest and charged with disturbing public order. His trial is due to begin on 28 October, according to his lawyer.

The former President of the National Assembly, Mamadou Koulibali, has been arrested twice since referendum campaigns began on 22 October before being released.

Amnesty International has noted a worrying pattern of arbitrary arrest and detention of opposition members during peaceful protests or gatherings.

During last year's presidential election period, more than 50 opposition supporters were arrested and detained solely for their political beliefs and for peacefully expressing their views. They were released after months in detention.

Amnesty International delegates, including Alioune Tine Regional Director for West and Central Africa, met the Ivorian Human Rights Minister in February to raise concerns, including on the detention of prisoners of conscience, secret detention places and selective justice. The Minister requested 100 days to consider Amnesty International's recommendations.

However, the government has failed to take any action, despite receiving a follow-up letter from the organization in April. Meanwhile arrests of opposition groups still continue.

Background

A referendum for constitutional changes is due to be held on 30 October. The new constitution would remove the maximum age limit for candidates, establish a Vice President's office and create a new Senate with a third of its members chosen by the President. Parliament has already approved the draft reforms.

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