

Jan Kohout
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic
Presidency of the Council of the European Union

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Dear Mr Kohout,

EU-ECOWAS Ministerial Troika

In view of the forthcoming EU–ECOWAS troika that you will be co-chairing on 16 June 2009, Amnesty International would like to bring to your attention a number of human rights concerns in the ECOWAS region. The guidelines on human rights dialogues highlight the EU's commitment to make use of every opportunity to raise human rights concerns with third countries at all levels. In particular, we would urge you to highlight EU concerns about the situation on the Niger delta, impunity in Guinea-Bissau and maternal mortality in Sierra Leone.

Situation in the Niger Delta

The people living in oil producing communities of the Niger Delta have seen their human rights undermined by oil companies that their government cannot or will not hold to account. The oil industry is responsible for widespread pollution of the Niger Delta environment. Pollution has damaged the soil, water and air, contributing to violations of the rights to health and a healthy environment, right to an adequate standard of living, including the rights to food and water, and the right to gain a living through work. Hundreds of thousands of people are affected, particularly the poorest and those that rely on traditional livelihoods such as fishing and agriculture.

People have a right to information on how extractive industry operations will affect them. The Presidency should use the occasion of the EU-ECOWAS troika to make clear that both governments and companies have a responsibility to ensure that information is both gathered and provide to people in a manner that is accessible to them.

The Presidency should also stress the importance of a mandatory assessment by government agencies and companies of the social and human rights impact of oil and gas projects, which must include the participation of affected communities. Taking responsibility for the impact on communities is a core part of ECOWAS' objective of ensuring the effective development of the region's energy resources.

The presence of oil along with the continuing issues of poverty, corruption and armed gangs have made the Niger Delta a very volatile region. Recently, the situation in the Niger Delta has deteriorated further, with an increase in violent confrontations between the armed groups and the security forces. Since 13 May 2009 thousands of villagers have been displaced and thousands more are trapped in the cross fire between the Joint Task Force (JTF), which is composed of personnel from the army, navy, air force and the mobile police set up in 2004 to restore order in the Niger Delta, and armed groups in Delta State, in South West Nigeria. Thousands have fled their communities and are unable to return to their homes. Many houses in the communities have been set on fire and destroyed by the military. People are still in hiding in the forest, with no access to medical care and food.

The Presidency should urge the government of Nigeria to use force only in a way that does not result in human right abuses, not to forcibly displace people, and ensure free access to those in need of medical care.

Impunity in Guinea-Bissau

Four people, including two prominent politicians, were killed and several others arrested on Friday 5 June 2009 after the armed forces claimed they were plotting a coup to overthrow the government and to kill the prime minister and the chief of staff of the armed forces. The deceased and those arrested were known to be close to the late President Bernardo "Nino" Vieira, who was killed by soldiers on 2 March 2009. The late President's killing followed that of the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, General Batista Tagme Na Waie, a few hours earlier. Several former members of government have also gone into hiding fearing for their safety. Observers fear a further deterioration of the human rights situation in the run-up to presidential elections, scheduled for 28 June 2009.

Francisco José Fadul, a Court President and former Prime Minister of Guinea-Bissau, was beaten by military personnel at his home in Bissau on Wednesday 1 April this year. Francisco Fadul held a press conference on Monday 30 March calling on the government to hold the military accountable for corruption and other crimes. He was reported to have been beaten by at least four military officials who hit him with the butts of their firearms and told him he was "too talkative". He received injuries all over his body – including the head – and a stab wound on his arm.

The beating follows the assault of well-known lawyer Pedro Infanda by the military. Pedro Infanda was arbitrarily arrested by military officials on Monday 23 March and was severely beaten with wooden objects for four days, and tortured. He was denied access to medical treatment, his family and an attorney. Hours before his unlawful arrest, Pedro Infanda held a press conference in his office speaking on behalf of his client, Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchute, former head of the Guinea Bissau Navy. In the press conference, Pedro Infanda expressed his client's opinion that the newly appointed Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces was not competent for his post.

The Presidency must call on the authorities in Guinea Bissau, to open a thorough, prompt, transparent and impartial investigation into the apparent extrajudicial execution of politicians by the armed forces, as well as into the arbitrary arrest and beatings and for those suspected to be responsible to be brought to justice. The Presidency should further call on the authorities in Guinea-Bissau to ensure that the military are not allowed to arrest or detain civilians. In this context, the election observation mission of the European Commission will have a crucial role to play in the monitoring of human rights violations.

Maternal mortality in Sierra Leone: Failure to provide essential care

Women face a higher risk of dying in childbirth in Sierra Leone than almost anywhere in the world. Women's right to life is being violated by the government's failure to take the minimum steps necessary to ensure that pregnant women receive vital health care. Women's right to health is being undermined by discrimination against those living in poverty. Hospitals and clinics are understaffed, lack basic equipment and medicines and are often far from people's homes. Patients in Sierra Leone have to pay directly about 70 per cent of the total costs of health care, making out-of-pocket health costs among the highest in Africa, according to UNICEF. In spite of an official government policy adopted in 2001 that medical care for pregnant women and children under five should be free, the government has taken no steps to make this a reality.

The Presidency must press Sierra Leone to take concrete and targeted steps to guarantee the right to the highest attainable standard of health according to its available resources. Such resources include those available from international co-operation and assistance. It should call on ECOWAS to support the government of Sierra Leone in tackling the issue of maternal mortality, in line with its objectives to work on health and gender issues in the region.

We welcome further discussion of these issues and would be grateful to be informed of any decisions relating to the above concerns.

Yours sincerely,



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Cc: Javier Solana, High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy
Benita Ferrero-Waldner, Commissioner for External Relations
Riina Kionka, Javier Solana's Personal Representative on Human Rights
Patrick Spirlet, Deputy Head of Unit for West Africa Region, DG DEV
Heads of EC delegation in ECOWAS countries