

Appendix to Human Rights Watch report “Nigeria: Renewed crackdown on freedom of expression”, December 2, 2003

Since completing its report “Nigeria: Renewed crackdown on freedom of expression”, which covers the period 2002 to 2003, Human Rights Watch has received further information on several serious cases, described below. Human Rights Watch is concerned at this intensification of assaults on the right to freedom of expression in Nigeria.

Ogoni activists arrested and threatened

In November 2003, police arrested dozens of activists of the Ogoni ethnic group who took part in processions, vigils and other commemorative events in Rivers State to mark the anniversary of the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) on November 10, 1995.

On November 10, 2003, in the southern oil port of Bonny, police disrupted a procession and arrested seven Ogoni activists: fourteen men and three women.¹ Several of those arrested stated that they were beaten by the police during and after their arrest.² They were detained overnight in the police station at Bonny and were released on November 11. All seventeen have been charged with unlawful procession and conduct likely to cause a breach of the peace. An initial court hearing took place on November 19 and was adjourned to December 9.

On November 14, police in Oginigba, a suburb of the southern city of Port Harcourt, arrested another twenty Ogoni activists who had taken part in a commemorative vigil on November 9, and detained them for one day. Some of those arrested described how they were threatened by the police during their detention: the police told them that their struggle was futile and that if they did not stop their protests, they would all be killed like Ken Saro-Wiwa. Police had also disrupted the vigil of November 9 in Port Harcourt by shooting into the air to disperse the activists.³

Since the Ogoni commemorative events of November 10, several leaders of MOSOP, including its president Ledum Mitee, have reported receiving threats from government sources and being subjected to other forms of intimidation in connection with their organization’s activities. Some of these threats appear to have been linked to public statements by MOSOP leaders around November 10, denouncing government abuses and the marginalization of the Ogoni people. At least one of the threats seemed to indicate that the government feared that MOSOP would publicize its grievances during the forthcoming

¹ The fourteen men are Boniface Nwika, Goodnews Akoneme, Monday Ziako, Favour Daddy, Doonu Nma, Francis Itaa, Kingdom Biira, Lucky Fineface, Dornu Tanee, Wiyo Sunday, Michel Kpola, Goteh Nnama, Goodluck Monday, and Gbigbom Mgbura. The three women are Blessing Nda, Helen Charles and Faith Wifa.

² Human Rights Watch correspondence, November 24, 2003. See also “Nigerian police charge 17 comrades of executed minority activist,” Agence France-Presse, November 13, 2003.

³ Human Rights Watch correspondence, November 24, 2003.

Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), due to take place in the Nigerian capital Abuja from December 5 to 8, 2003.⁴

MOSOP leaders and activists have been threatened and intimidated on several previous occasions. For example, in March 2003, armed men broke into the home of Ledum Mitee, searching for him unsuccessfully. He and at least one other MOSOP leader had earlier received threats and been warned to steer clear of their political activities.⁵

Journalist beaten and threatened

Journalist Psaro Yornamue, bureau chief of the Rivers State office of the *Daily Independent* newspaper, was beaten and threatened after writing an article alleging corruption by the deputy governor of Rivers State and the majority leader of the Rivers State house of assembly. Following the publication of the article entitled “Rivers deputy governor in N20m contract scam” on November 14, 2003, Psaro Yornamue received several threats, including from the personal assistant to the deputy governor on media affairs and the majority leader of the Rivers State house of assembly. On November 21, as he was on his way to his office, he was beaten by unidentified men, who threatened him again and warned him that his life would be at risk if he did not cease his criticisms of the deputy governor.⁶

Magazine editors arrested and charged with sedition

Three journalists at *Insider Weekly* magazine—editor-in-chief Osa Director and editors Janet Mba Afolabi and Chuks Onwudinjo—were charged on November 26 with sedition and defamation of character, following the publication of an article alleging that senior government officials, including Vice-President Atiku Abubakar and National Security Adviser to the President, Aliyu Mohammed Gusau, were involved in the large-scale theft of crude oil, known as “illegal bunkering”. The article, entitled “The Aso Rock bunkering scandal” [Aso Rock is the name of the location of the presidency] appeared in the November 24, 2003 edition of the magazine.

On Saturday, November 22, the Lagos State police public relations officer visited the office of the magazine in Lagos and told editor-in-chief Osa Director that there was a directive from the Inspector General of Police (the head of the national police force) that he should go to the police station to discuss the article. Osa Director said that he would do so on Monday and called the Lagos State police commissioner to inform him so. However, on Monday November 24, before he had had the opportunity to go the police station, four police officers in civilian clothes came to the office of the magazine and arrested Osa Director and his two co-editors, Janet Mba Afolabi and Chuks Onwudinjo. They were detained for two days in Panti police station, in the Yaba area of Lagos. On November 26, they were taken to court and charged. They were released on bail after paying 250,000 naira each (approximately US \$1,850). Their court hearing is scheduled for January.⁷

⁴ Ibid. See also MOSOP press release “Threat to the life of the MOSOP President,” November 19, 2003.

⁵ See Human Rights Watch news release “Violence against Nigerian political activist,” March 29, 2003.

⁶ Human Rights Watch and other correspondence, November 24 and 25, 2003.

⁷ Human Rights Watch telephone interview, November 27, 2003.