

Gambia: Women's rights defenders arrested and detained without charge

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WLUML Statement on the Arrest of Women's Human Rights Defenders in the Gambia, Dr. Isatou Touray and Ms. Amie Bojang-Sissoho

The WLUML network is deeply concerned to learn of the arrests of our colleagues Dr. Isatou Touray and Ms. Amie Bojang-Sissoho on Monday, October 11, 2010 by an officer of the National Intelligence Agency in the Gambia. According to reports received, they had been threatened and harassed prior to their arrest, before being held in police custody without charge until being transferred to the Mile Two Central Prison on Tuesday, October 12, 2010. The two women were arrested and detained for an alleged misappropriation of 30,000 euros. Their request for bail, despite this being a bailable offence, was denied on Tuesday, October 12 and they were ordered to spend eight days in prison before appearing before the court on Wednesday 20 October.

The WLUML network joins in the calls for the immediate and unconditional release on bail of Dr. Touray and Ms. Bojang-Sissoho, and urge they are guaranteed their right to a free and fair trial, security and dignity of person, and freedom from unlawful detention. WLUML also maintains that human rights defenders and other members of civil society must not be threatened, harassed, or prosecuted on the basis of their peaceable defense of the rights of others.

Dr. Isatou Touray and Ms. Amie Bojang-Sissoho are, respectively, the Executive Director and Program Coordinator for the Gambia Committee for Traditional Practices (GAMCOTRAP), and have for many years been active in the promotion of gender equality, rights of women and children, particularly in the fight against female genital mutilation and other discriminatory practices. Dr. Touray is also Secretary General of the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC). She was named 'Gambian of the Year' in 2008 by *The News and Report Weekly Magazine* for her work around FGM and promoting the rights of women and children. Dr. Touray is a Board member of Women Living Under Muslim Laws for the past 2 years, and both women have been active in the network for over a decade. WLUML is a transnational solidarity network which promotes and protects the rights of women, especially in Muslim contexts and communities.

GAMCOTRAP is one of the leading organizations working to promote the rights of women and girls through the abandonment of female genital mutilation and other harmful practices against women and girls in the Gambia. GAMCOTRAP's years of struggle and dedicated work has contributed substantially to the development of women and girls in the Gambia and has also convinced nearly 100 circumcisers to publicly throw away their knives and abandon this practice.

However, in recent years, the Gambian government has changed its policy and no longer supports women's and girls rights to bodily integrity and the elimination of female genital mutilation. Indeed President Jammeh's personal religious advisor has been given platforms on state radio to advocate FGM, claiming that it is part of Islam. In 1999, the security of GAMCOTRAP members was threatened as the President publicly stated that he could not guarantee the safety of activists who campaign against FGM. This was followed by a directive to the Director of Radio Television Gambia

prohibiting the dissemination of personal messages that oppose FGM or referring medical risks. Only messages supporting this practice were allowed in the state media GAMCOTRAP had then been the first organization of civil society in the Gambia to respond by sending an open letter of protest to the President. GAMCOTRAP has continued to work to end female genital mutilation.

In May 2010 the Presidency set up a commission of investigation into the allegation that GAMCOTRAP had been mis-managing donor funds from an organization called Yolocamba Solidaridad. The Coalition for Human Rights in the Gambia states that "After careful investigation, the various reports and documents, the Committee had concluded that allegations of abuse were unfounded. But, after presenting her findings, the commission was dissolved and some of its members dismissed by the Gambian government. A second committee was then established, but while the GAMCOTRAP [was] awaiting the conclusions of this second investigation, the two women were arrested and imprisoned."

(http://www.ouestaf.com/Arrestation-de-deux-éminentes-femmes-defenseurs-droits-humains-en-Gambie-Declaration_a3309.html)

It is not only GAMCOTRAP that has been on the radar of the government of current President Yaya Jammeh should also be recalled that President Jammeh has consistently made direct threats to activists and defenders of human rights. Last year he threatened to arrest activists of human rights. In September 2010, human rights defender and director of Africa in Democracy and Good Governance (ADG), Edwin Nebolisa Nwakaeme. He was jailed for six months and fined of 10,000 dalasis (about USD \$300) by the Banjul Tribunal because he was convicted for "spreading false news" about the Presidency of the Republic. Nebolisa was arrested in March 2010 following the publication of a letter he had written to the chair to announce the appointment of the daughter of President Jammeh as a goodwill ambassador to Africa to democracy and good governance. The magistrate had also requested a permanent stay of the organization headed by Mr. Nebolisa. Recently the government initiated a process to change the regulation of NGOs placing more restrictions on them, in order to better control them.

The WLUML network joins in the calls for the immediate and unconditional release on bail of Dr. Touray and Ms. Bojang-Sissoho. We urge they are guaranteed their right to a free and fair trial, security and dignity of person, and freedom from unlawful detention as guaranteed in Articles 9 and 10 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Article 6 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

WLUML also maintains that human rights defenders and other members of civil society must not be threatened, harassed, or prosecuted on the basis of their peaceable defense of the rights of others.

*Please contact local Gambian Embassies
Demand immediate release and fair trial
also contact the media
ask local human rights groups and women's groups to write, call and put pressure on Gambia*

P.S.

* Source: WLUML networkers. Submitted on 10/14/2010 in West Africa Gambia State control WLUML/allies