

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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(New York) - One of Liberia's most prominent human rights lawyers, Tiawan Gongloe, has been brutalized in police custody and is hospitalized as a result, Human Rights Watch said today. Police guards remain near his hospital bed, and the police director has announced that Mr. Gongloe remains in police custody without charge pending an investigation.

"The government of Charles Taylor is using violence to silence independent voices speaking out about Liberia's deteriorating human rights record, said Peter Takirambudde, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch's Africa division. President Taylor is tightening his repressive grip, and Liberians who call on the government to respect human rights are getting in his way.

Although no charges have been brought, Mr. Gongloe appears to have been arrested in connection with a speech he gave at a March 2002 conference in neighboring Guinea on peace in the Mano River Union. The speech dealt with ways in which civil society groups could play a role in the attainment of peace in the Mano River Union, and condemned the use of violence as a means to state power. The same day as Mr. Gongloe's arrest, the government ordered the closure of The Analyst newspaper, which had just printed the speech made by Mr. Gongloe.

Mr. Gongloe is well known for his representation of clients in human rights cases, and for speaking out against security force abuses. On April 24, Mr. Gongloe was stopped in his car by police officer Dolo Mark, arrested, and taken to the police headquarters around 5:00 pm. At the police station, he was interrogated about the statement he had made at the conference in Guinea.

After briefly being questioned, he was stripped nude and placed in the police cells in the basement. Two plainclothes police officers in the cell proceeded to severely beat and kick him through the night. They also threatened him, telling him he was a dissident whom they would deal with, and that they would kill him. In the morning, he was taken again for questioning, but was unable to stand or sit as a result of his injuries. Lawyers who had been notified of Mr. Gongloe's whereabouts pressured the police to hospitalize Mr. Gongloe. Mr. Gongloe is currently at Cooper Hospital where he is receiving treatment. As a result of the torture, Mr. Gongloe has lost some hearing in his left ear, his left eye is swollen and bloodied, and his head and body are badly bruised.

Two police officers remain on guard outside his hospital room. On April 25, the Police Director Paul Mulbah reportedly made a statement on radio saying that Mr. Gongloe remained in police custody while police investigations continued.

Clearly, Mr. Gongloe remains at great risk of further police brutality and harassment, said Takirambudde. President Charles Taylor must immediately end this harassment and intimidation of rights activists.

This incident is the most recent in a spate of arrests carried out by the government since it imposed a state of emergency on February 8, 2002. In the face of renewed rebel action and negative international publicity, the government of President Charles Taylor has become increasingly intolerant of criticism. In particular, the government has intensified its harassment and intimidation of the independent press, civil society groups, and legitimate political opposition groups.

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