

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Cameroon: Arbitrary detentions and military courts highlight the latest crackdown on opposition members**

The arrests, arbitrary detentions and prosecutions in military courts of opposition members who were peacefully gathering are the latest example of Cameroonian authorities' crackdown on dissenting voices since late September, Amnesty International said today.

At least 500 people were arrested on 22 September, the majority of them members of the opposition Movement for the Renaissance of Cameroon (MRC). Of those, 160 remain in detention, 13 have been sentenced to prison by civilian courts, and 14 appeared before a military court.

“The harsh repression of opposition and dissenting voices shows no sign of relenting in recent months. People simply exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly and demonstration have paid a high price with prison terms based on trumped-up charges,” said Fabien Offner, Amnesty International West and Central Africa researcher.

“The authorities must immediately put an end to the mass arbitrary arrests and detentions and immediately release prisoners of conscience.”

Protests were scheduled on 22 September by the MRC in several towns, but they were banned by the authorities which waged a campaign of arrests and arbitrary detentions of MRC supporters.

According to the lawyers, at least 160 arrested people remain in detention as of 25 November, in the towns of Douala, Yaoundé, Bafoussam and Nkongsamba. The lawyers have filed applications for their release 45 times but were rejected each time.

Eight people have been sentenced to two years in prison on 17 November by the court of first instance of the town of Mfou (Center) which found them guilty for « gathering, assembly and public demonstrations, and rebellion in group”.

Five other people have been sentenced in the same period to four months in prison in the town of Nkongsamba (West) for attempt of public demonstration.

#### **Use of military courts**

Fourteen people arrested on 22 September were prosecuted by the military court in Bafoussam (West) between 24 and 25 November, for "attempted insurgency and unauthorized public demonstration and gathering ".

One of the defendants was also prosecuted for "contempt to the President of the Republic" and for holding "two signs calling for the departure of President Biya”.

At least 45 other MRC members also arrested on 22 September were convicted of "attempted revolt", "rebellion", "aggravated assembly" and "lack of national identity card" by the Yaoundé military court,

which placed them in pre-trial detention. Those imprisoned include Olivier Bibou Nissack, Maurice Kamto's spokesman, and Alain Fogue Tedom, national treasurer of the MRC.

In Yaoundé, Awasum Mispa Fri, president of MRC women's group was arrested on 21 November and charged by a military court with "complicity in revolution and rebellion" after demanding the end of Maurice Kamto's house arrest along with dozens of other women. She was put in pre-trial detention.

In a separate incident, four members of the movement, Stand Up for Cameroon, very active in the anglophone regions, were arrested on 18 September by the gendarmerie in Douala after attending a meeting at the headquarters of the opposition Cameroon People's Party. They are still in pre-trial detention after being brought before the Douala Bonanjo military court, which charged them with "attempted conspiracy, revolution and insurrection".

"Military courts should in no way be competent to try civilians as reminded in the guidelines and principles on the right to a fair trial of the African Commission on Human and People's rights," said Fabien Offner.

### **"The DST agent slapped and punched me at the face"**

Amnesty International spoke to a MRC member arrested in September in Douala, who said he was subjected to torture or other ill-treatment during his interrogation, which took place without the presence of a lawyer at the Directorate of Territorial Surveillance (DST) located at the port of the town. He was then detained incommunicado for two months and five days in another site, without being brought before a judge.

Released earlier this month, he told the organisation he had gone to the DST after receiving a police summons. After he refused their demand to unlock his phone, a police officer handcuffed him and tied his arms to his feet:

"He asked me if I am a MRC member (... ) if I voted in the last election... if I took part to the protests... Then told me I was stirring up rebellion. Again, he told me to unlock my phone, I refused, and he slapped and punched me at the face....," he said.

"Later policemen handcuffed my hands behind my back. I got into the back of a pickup, and was taken to another area, still handcuffed like a bandit. I was searched, they took down all my identification documents, and put me in a windowless room, with mosquitoes, and no drinkable water. This is where I spent over two months.... "

"Acts of torture or other suffering inflicted by DST agents on those arrested should be impartially and independently investigated and those responsible prosecuted and punished," said Fabien Offner.