

NIGERIA

ISSUE

Despite continued pressure from the international community, including the United Nations and the Commonwealth Heads of Government, who met in Edinburgh on October 24-27, 1997, the human rights situation in Nigeria has worsened over the past year.

BACKGROUND

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), having met for the ninth time since its establishment at Auckland in 1995, presented a report to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Edinburgh. CMAG's recommendations with regard to Nigeria were adopted unanimously: unless there has been a credible transition to democratic civilian government, rule of law and respect for human rights by October 1998, Nigeria could be expelled from the Commonwealth and come under severe economic sanctions.

In Nigeria a number of recent events are cause for concern. Although General Abacha announced in November that political prisoners would be released, none in fact have, and the number of people in detention has increased dramatically. There has been a steady stream of journalists picked up and held without charge. Oppression of the Ogoni people in the Niger Delta has continued unabated, with a vicious crackdown on January 3, 1998 putting another 30 people in jail. The arrest on December 21, 1997, of General Oladipo Diya, Abacha's deputy, and 11 accomplices in an alleged coup plot, has been followed by the arrest of more than 100 suspects. Many others are in hiding or on the move as a result, while journalists have been warned to exercise extreme caution in reporting about the coup. The death in prison from unexplained causes of one of the country's most prominent prisoners of conscience, former military Vice-President Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, caused wide-spread shock and dismay.

The so-called Transition Plan has seen the elections for State Assemblies go ahead on December 6, 1997, but with only the five government-approved political parties in the running and a very low voter turn-out. The draft constitution, which contains the framework for the transition process, has yet to be published. Government continues to be by decree, with civilian court rulings subject to overruling by the military regime.

Apart from the Ogoni people, we have little information about persecution of other minority groups. It has been widely noted that General Diya and two of his senior colleagues who were arrested are Yorubas; there are again reports of increased Yoruba dissatisfaction with a largely northern, Muslim regime. Women's groups have not been targeted, as they are not seen as posing as great a threat as the opposition groups or the press.

One positive development has been that, perhaps as a result of relentless international pressure, Nigeria announced in December that human rights were to be a subject in the secondary school curriculum.

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