

PRESS RELEASE – Friday 9 January 2009

Gabon: Anti-Corruption Advocates Imprisoned On Trumped-Up Charges

Publish What You Pay (PWYP), the global civil society movement for transparency in the oil, gas and mining industries, condemns the imprisonment of anti-corruption activists in Gabon and calls for their immediate release and for due process and their human rights to be respected.

PWYP Gabon members Marc Ona Essangi and Georges Mpage, along with civil servant Grégory Ngoua Mintsa, and two journalists, Gaston Asseko and Dieudonné Koungou were charged on Wednesday January 7 with ‘possession of a document for dissemination for the purpose of propaganda’ and with ‘oral or written propaganda for incitement of rebellion against state authorities’.¹ Koungou was released on bail but the others have been transferred to prison.

Yesterday morning, a lawyer representing the men was prevented by police in Paris from boarding a flight to Gabon on the grounds the Gabonese authorities had just revoked his visa.

The charges relate to an open letter criticizing Gabon’s President Bongo published on the internet.² The men’s lawyer, Maître Ruphin Nkoulou Ondo, commented: “My clients are not the authors of this letter, which is in the possession of hundreds of people: are they all to be detained too?”

The men were arrested on December 30 and 31 without a warrant, and kept in preventive detention (*garde à vue*) at police headquarters until January 7, despite the maximum period of detention permitted under Gabonese law expiring on Monday January 3. While being held in preventive detention, they had no access to legal counsel and were kept in unsanitary conditions. According to their lawyer, Mintsa, Asseko and Mpage are in need of urgent medical care.

The arrests follow months of harassment of activists speaking out about the mismanagement of public money in the oil-rich African country. In January 2008, PWYP Gabon, along with 22 other NGOs, was suspended by the authorities, but resumed its work after an international outcry.³ Grégory Ngoua Mintsa is a civil plaintiff in a case filed recently in Paris calling for an investigation into expensive real estate and other assets in France acquired by three African heads of state, including Gabon’s President Bongo.

Gabon committed to open and peaceful dialogue with civil society when it joined the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), a global initiative for more transparent management of oil, gas and mineral wealth. Civil society participation and public debate is a cornerstone of EITI, and government representatives sit alongside Ona on a national oversight committee. The government of Gabon is also a member of the international Board of the EITI, along with representatives of other governments, companies and civil society.⁴

“This pattern of behaviour by the Gabonese government is incompatible with the EITI principles, and undermines its leadership position on the EITI Board. Governments and other bodies that support the EITI, including the UK as a founding member, should condemn these arrests if they wish the initiative to remain credible,” said PWYP International Coordinator Radhika Sarin

PWYP is calling for those detained to be released immediately and the charges dropped.

NOTES:

1. In French ‘délit de détention d'un document en vue de sa diffusion à des fins de propagande’ and ‘délit de détention d'un document en vue de propagande orale ou écrite et incitation à la révolte contre les autorités de l'Etat’.
2. [See http://okouetch.canalblog.com/archives/2009/01/04/11969532.html](http://okouetch.canalblog.com/archives/2009/01/04/11969532.html)

3. Since June, Ona has faced an illegal travel ban and in July 2008, along with other activists, he was interrogated by police after calling for an investigation into the financial affairs of the country's Chief Prosecutor. See www.publishwhatyoupay.org
4. On 28 July 2004, the Minister of Economy, Finance, and Budget of Gabon informed the World Bank of his country's commitment to adhere to the EITI. In March 2005, the government expressed its commitment to join the EITI in a letter of intent to the IMF. Since then, Gabon has published three EITI reports. See www.eitransparency.org

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