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Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression
African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights
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London, April 5, 2006

Dear Commissioner Tlakula,

Re: Attacks on the press in Gambia

ARTICLE 19 is gravely concerned by the arbitrary closure of the 'Independent' newspaper and the detention of Madi Ceesay, and Musa Saidykhan, respectively General Manager and Editor-In-Chief of the "Independent". According to reliable sources from the Gambia, Mr. Ceesay and Saidykhan were arrested on March 28, 2006 by members of Gambia's Police Intervention Unit and of the Criminal Investigation Department wing of Gambia police force. The two journalists are currently detained at the National Intelligent Agency quarters. Their detention violates the Gambia Constitution which prohibits arbitrary arrest and limits the detention without trial to 72 hours.

The reasons for their detention and closure of their newspaper were not given to their relatives and colleagues. However, in an interview with the BBC on March 29, 2006, the Secretary of State for information, Neneh Mcdoll-Gaye said that the two were being investigated in connection with an alleged coup attempt on March 21.

Our records demonstrate that the "Independent" and other private media outlets have been the victim of many attacks over the past years. These acts have included the arson attack and the destruction of the 'Independent' printing press by unknown assailants; the burning of the house of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)-Banjul correspondent, Ebrahima Sillah; the killing of the Editor of the Point



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newspaper, Deyda Hydera in 2004 and the recent closure of Sud Fm Radio in 2005.

Many Gambian journalists have been harassed and received death threats from the so called "Green Boys", allegedly linked to the Gambia security apparatus. Key members of the media have fled the country for fear for their safety.

The arbitrary arrests and detentions of Gambian journalists and the closure of the few independent media outlets in the country appear to be part of a plan to silence and weaken critical voices and alternative sources of news and information.

In addition to the arbitrary arrests and attacks on the media and journalists, ARTICLE 19 has many times raised concerns about the harsh media laws enacted by the Gambia government to muzzle the independent and private media.

The Gambia is the permanent headquarters of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and will soon host the African Union Summit. In view of the honor conferred upon the country, the least that can be expected from the Gambian authorities is to show tolerance, allow diverse views and respect the human rights principles enshrined in the Constitutive Act of the African Union and in the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression adopted in Banjul.

ARTICLE 19 urges the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to request that the Gambian authorities release immediately Madi Ceesay and Musa Saidu Khan or that they be charged in accordance with international standards. ARTICLE 19 also calls upon the Commission to request that the Gambia government allow the independent and the two journalists to resume their work and publish freely.

ARTICLE 19 further urges you as Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression in Africa to undertake as soon as practical a fact-finding mission in the Gambia and ensure that the Gambian media can operate freely before and during the 2006 presidential elections.

Your sincerely,

Dr. Agnès Callamard

Executive Director