



July 22, 2010

The Honorable Michael H. Posner  
Assistant Secretary of State  
Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Assistant Secretary Posner,

We, the undersigned organizations, write to urge the U.S. government to exert firm pressure on the Gambian government to improve Gambia's worrying human rights situation. Real or perceived opponents of the government, including human rights defenders, as well as ordinary Gambians, are regularly subjected to serious human rights violations at the hands of government officials. The targeting of a number of prominent journalists, including one who has been disappeared, has further exposed the profound threats faced by Gambia's media and civil society.

The National Intelligence Agency (NIA), army, police, and judicial authorities in Gambia regularly subject suspected members of the opposition to arbitrary arrests and detentions, excessive use of force, torture, unfair trials, prolonged pre-trial detention, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial executions. Harsh detention conditions, including severe overcrowding, poor sanitation and foul food, are believed to have led to a large number of deaths in recent years. Detainees formerly held at Gambia's notorious Mile 2 prison and others report having been kept in solitary confinement for long periods without access to daylight, food or exercise.

Strict controls on political freedoms enforced by the government leave little room for a real political opposition or strong civil society organizations. Gambia is effectively ruled as a one-party state, with most power consolidated under President Yahya Jammeh. Recent trends of intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and disappearances of those critical of the President indicate that the presidential elections scheduled for 2011 are likely to lead to human rights violations. On September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009, the President reportedly threatened to kill anyone wishing to destabilize the country and specifically threatened human rights defenders and those working with them. As a result, international organizations and members of Gambia's civil society boycotted the session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights held in Gambia in November.

Members of Gambia's fledgling media are routinely subjected to harassment, assaults, death threats, and closures, as well as arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture, and unfair trials. One such case is that of Ebrima Manneh, a reporter for the pro-government *Daily Observer* who was

arrested in July 2006, for attempting to republish a BBC article critical of the Gambian government. Manneh's whereabouts are currently unknown. Despite a June 2008 order for his release from the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice and several witnesses having testified that they saw Manneh during his arrest and while he was in prison, the Gambian government continues to deny that he is in its custody.

We respectfully ask that you condemn the human rights abuses committed by the government of Gambia and take the following actions to improve the human rights situation for all Gambians:

- Support the establishment of a joint ECOWAS-African Union Independent Commission of Inquiry into suspected cases of enforced disappearance and extrajudicial executions in Gambia;
- Urge the government of Gambia to release Ebrima Manneh, in compliance with the June 2008 ruling of the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice;
- Pressure the President of Gambia and other authorities to guarantee freedom of political expression and assembly in advance of, and during, the upcoming Presidential elections;
- Substantially increase U.S. support for civil society in Gambia, especially the Gambia Bar Association and the Gambian Press Union.

We look forward to cooperating with you on U.S. government policy towards Gambia. We thank you in advance for your prompt attention to the concerns raised in this letter, and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Gerald LeMelle  
Executive Director, Africa Action

Larry Cox  
Executive Director, Amnesty International USA

Joel Simon  
Executive Director, Committee to Protect Journalists

CC: Ambassador Johnnie Carson