

Equatorial Guinea: World Leaders Should Press on Rights ^[1]

First Visit by United Nations Head, Spain's Prime Minister

June 25, 2014

(New York) – Global leaders visiting Equatorial Guinea ^[2] for an African Union summit should call on the government of President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo to improve its human rights record and urgently address corruption, EG Justice and Human Rights Watch said today.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy of Spain are expected to deliver remarks on June 26, 2014, to African heads of state and other dignitaries attending the African Union Summit outside the capital city, Malabo.

“The Obiang government uses visits by prominent leaders to legitimize its 35-year misrule,” said Tutu Alicante, an Equatoguinean lawyer who heads EG Justice ^[3] from exile in the United States. “The least they can do in return is press President Obiang to stop targeting activists and others who speak out against him.”

Other participants in the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government, being held June 26 and 27 as part of the AU Summit, will include Presidents Jacob Zuma of South Africa, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz of Mauritania, and Salva Kiir of South Sudan, as well as the president-elect of Guinea-Bissau, José Mário Vaz, and John Kufuor, the former president of Ghana, according to official and media reports.

The summit ^[4] is intended to focus largely on agriculture investment and reducing the incidence of hunger across Africa. Government leaders are also expected to address regional security and other issues.

Although conditions inside Equatorial Guinea are not on the formal agenda and representatives of the country's few, beleaguered independent activist organizations are not included in the event, it will be difficult for some participants to avoid the topic.

It will be the first time ^[5] a Spanish prime minister visits the former Spanish colony since 1991. Although foreign ministers have exchanged visits and President Obiang has been received in Madrid, such encounters frequently have been marked by controversy.

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Rajoy declined ^[6] to be photographed with Obiang at a state funeral, to meet bilaterally with him, or to attend an AU-European Union dinner at which they were to be seated together. When Equatorial Guinea was criticized in the Spanish parliament, Obiang's government reacted ^[7] strongly to the rebuke.

President Obiang has ruled Equatorial Guinea since taking power in an August 1979 coup, making him Africa's longest-serving ruler. Freedom of association and assembly are severely curtailed [8] in Equatorial Guinea, greatly limiting space for independent groups. Local journalists are unable to criticize the government or address issues the authorities disapprove of without risk of censorship or reprisal. The political opposition is subjected to arbitrary arrest, intimidation, and harassment. The country's two-chamber parliament, with 170 seats in all, has only one opposition representative.

Equatorial Guinea is one of the largest oil-producers in sub-Saharan Africa and has a small population. Its GDP per capita is on par with Saudi Arabia's and higher than Portugal's, but socio-economic conditions are worse than in many African countries with far fewer resources.

A tiny elite close to the president has enriched itself from the nation's natural resources. Numerous investigations [9] have alleged high-level corruption and money-laundering, including by President Obiang's eldest son and presumed successor, Teodoro ("Teodorín") Nguema Obiang Mangué. In an apparent effort to grant him immunity from foreign prosecution, his father appointed Teodorín the country's second vice president, among other posts.

Foreign dignitaries at the AU summit, including Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Prime Minister Rajoy, should press Obiang to stop repression of activists, the political opposition, journalists, and people targeted for perceived disloyalty; to combat corruption; and to use public funds to address basic social and economic rights, Human Rights Watch and EG Justice said.

"Equatorial Guinea's vast resources should be used to meet the social and economic rights of its people, not simply to bankroll events that present a false image," said Lisa Misol [10], senior business and human rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Unless high-level visitors speak up about human rights and corruption, President Obiang will continue playing host while ignoring these critical abuses."

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