

Not on our watch: Nigerian Human Rights Community releases a report on the Bello sacking

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Maja Daruwala, Director of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, has welcomed the release of a report by the Nigerian Human Rights Community on the circumstances surrounding the termination of the head of the Nigerian National Human Rights Commission, Bukhari Bello, by the government last month.

On Monday 19 June 2006, in a crushing blow to human rights and good governance in Nigeria, the government sacked Mr Bello, for daring to fulfil the mandate of his office – frank, open and honest discussion of the human rights dilemmas facing Nigeria, Africa and the international community. Ms Daruwala condemned this action, saying that it was in breach of domestic laws, regional accords and international practice.

“Mr Bello was sacked because he did not toe the government line,” explained Ms Daruwala. “Mr Bayo Ojo, the Attorney General and Justice Minister, met with Mr Bello before he was fired and told him that the President was unhappy with the public statements that he had been making. Mr Bello had made a number of public statements, all within the scope of his responsibilities as head of the Commission and with the instruction and full support of the Council that oversees the Commission.” The Justice Minister particularly referred to Mr Bello’s public criticism of Nigeria’s internal security agencies for harassing and intimidating journalists, condemnation of the recent practice of African Presidents of amending national constitutions to allow them to stay on as leaders after their legitimate term had come to and end (a tactic President Obasanjo himself recently attempted, but failed, to use) and statement echoing the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights that the Guantanamo Bay detention facility in Cuba is incompatible with the international obligations of the United States of America and should be closed.

The government’s actions are unacceptable and have been condemned nationally, regionally and internationally. Ms Daruwala said, “The government’s actions are a clear breach of the Paris Principles, the internationally accepted guidelines for national human rights institutions and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights – as well as the law that sets up the National Commission itself.”

Nigeria was recently appointed to the new United Nations Human Rights Council. The appointment was approved after Nigeria guaranteed its “determination and commitment to continue to promote and protect human rights at home by strengthening and actively supporting the work of the National Human Rights Commission.” “Sacking the head of the Commission because he was doing his job does not strengthen or support; on the contrary, it weakens and undermines,” commented Ms Daruwala, “Taking this action so soon after making its pledge to the United Nations makes a mockery of President Obasanjo’s commitment to safeguarding human rights in Nigeria, as well as undermining the new Human Rights Council before it has even begun its substantive work.”

The report by the Nigerian Human Rights Community on the sacking, *The People vs The Federal Attorney-General: In the Matter of the Independence of Nigeria’s National Human Rights Commission*, was released in Nigeria today. The report details the circumstances that led up to the termination of Mr Bello, analyses the legal and political context surrounding the termination and calls for an urgent and public inquiry into the actions of the Justice Minister. The report also highlights the need for the Nigerian government to guarantee that it will respect and uphold the independence of the Commission.

“The release of today’s report is an important chance for the voice of the Nigerian community to make itself heard,” said Ms Daruwala, “and to make certain that the government understands that the Nigerian people will not allow the independence of their Human Rights Commission to be usurped by politicians who want nothing more than to silence their critics. The government must listen to its people and the calls of the international community. An inquiry into Bello’s sacking must be put together. The government must promise that it will respect and uphold the independence of the Commission – and it must make this promise a reality by acting to ensure its independence.”

For more information regarding CHRI or this media release, contact Daniel Woods at CHRI (+91-11-9871203760 or <mailto:daniel@humanrightsinitiative.org>) or access the CHRI website at www.humanrightsinitiative.org.

For more information regarding the release of the Nigerian Human Rights Community report, *The People vs. The Federal Attorney-General: In the Matter of the Independence of Nigeria’s National Human Rights Commission*, contact Chidi Odinkalu at the Open Society Justice Initiative (<mailto:chidio@hotmail.com>).

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-partisan, international NGO working for the practical realisation of human rights in the countries of the Commonwealth.