

DEFENDING Lawyers Serving Lawyers

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Evidence against a Congolese human rights lawyer condemned to death by a military court in Kinshasa earlier this year was obtained by torture, according to defence attorneys. Firmin Yangambi, President of the Congolese NGO Peace on Earth dedicated to helping victims of the Congo war was arrested and charged with the illegal possession of weapons or ammunition and for attempting to organise an insurrectional movement. He has already lost an appeal against the death sentence.

The EU project “Lawyers Serving Lawyers” allowed the fledgling International Observatory of Lawyers (IOL), to take up Mr Yangambi’s case claiming lack of evidence to support the charges, noting the “eminently political character” of the decision.

Mr Yangambi’s only “crime”, say his supporters, has been to bring public attention to human rights abuses and attacks on democracy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Awaiting trial it is claimed he was deprived of sleep, food and water over several days and was put under constant psychological pressure by the torture of two prisoners, people he knows.

IOL has provided a lawyer for the defence and enabled Mr Yangambi, in declining health, to receive medical attention and medication. Calling for his immediate and unconditional release, the IOL was hoping that pressure from a Congress in Kinshasa mid-December of more than 1000 lawyers from French speaking countries all over the world would at least persuade the court to reduce Mr Yangambi’s death sentence to one of detention only.

The International Observatory for Lawyers was set up to work on cases of lawyers under threat on account of their human rights defence activities, providing them with moral and material support, as well as legal assistance. The fate of Firmin Yangambi is one of 15 urgent cases on its books. The Observatory also conducts training activities in Colombia, Algeria and Armenia aimed at strengthening local Bar associations and other professional groups, subsequently contributing to their protection.