



## One song. Three years imprisonment

### UN expert group:

**“Cameroon should compensate Lapiro.” The singer’s rights were violated by state**

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has issued a legal opinion declaring that the detention of Lapiro de Mbanga, one of Cameroon’s most famous singers, by the Cameroonian Government was completely arbitrary and a violation of international law, specifically the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

In his song ‘Constipated Constitution’ Mbanga criticized President Paul Biya for changing the constitution in his own favour. The song became an anthem for demonstrators in Cameroon in 2008 and in order to silence de Mbanga false charges were made against him. The singer was charged for inciting demonstrators to burn down a banana plantation.

Freemuse and other freedom of expression organisations launched several international campaigns for his release and in 2009 initiated a partnership with Freedom Now, a US based advocacy organisation. The communication from the UN expert group comes in response to a petition filed by Freedom Now and a team of lawyers with the law firm Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP.

The UN Working Group, a panel of independent human rights experts from around the world, calls for the government to pardon Lapiro de Mbanga and to pay him compensation. Its legal opinion is dated 1 September 2011 but has only now been released. The expert group says that “the song Constipated Constitution can only be seen as a political proclamation, without any incentive to violence, which coincides with all of Mr Lapiro de Mbanga’s personal and political background.”

### Background information

Notified by the Media Foundation for West Africa, Freemuse launched its first international campaign for the release of de Mbanga in April 2008 and developed several campaigns in collaboration with PEN International, Mondomix and Vigier Guitars, Lapiro de Mbanga’s guitar provider.

Freemuse nominated and received on behalf of Lapiro de Mbanga the Freedom to Create Imprisoned Artist Prize in 2009. The International Music Council discussed the imprisonment of de Mbanga with the Cameroonian Minister of Culture and even UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon has discussed the imprisonment with President Paul Biya.

On April 8, 2011, the singer was released from detention after serving his full prison term. Despite his release from prison, de Mbanga remains under pressure from authorities to pay fines totalling over half a million US dollars. Attempts to appeal his conviction and penalty in Cameroon have been unsuccessful so far.

Freemuse Executive Director, Marie Korpe says:

“The case against Lapiro illustrates how far a government will go in order to silence an artist, who voices the frustrations of a whole nation. The government of Cameroon and the court system has taken away three years of Lapiro and his family’s life and should not prolong this painful process further, but compensate Lapiro in dignity. The case further illustrates that national and international campaigns can make a difference and Freemuse would like to thank all individuals and organisations who engaged in the campaign for his release.”

• **Attachment:** The UN Group's legal opinion: *‘Avis No 32/2011 (Cameroun) - Communication transmise au Gouvernement le 26 janvier 2011’*

• **For further information and/or interview:**

Call Freemuse Programme Manager Ole Reitov, phone: +45 2323 2765

Freemuse is an independent international organisation which advocates freedom of expression for musicians and composers worldwide. The organisation’s home page, [freemuse.org](http://freemuse.org), is the world’s largest knowledge base on music censorship. For more information about Freemuse, its activities and publications, see [www.freemuse.org](http://www.freemuse.org)