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Zimbabwe: electoral observers must not be silent witnesses

Human rights must be central to anyone intending to monitor the forthcoming elections in Zimbabwe, Maina Kiai, Amnesty International's Africa Director, said in the light of the Zimbabwean government's refusal to accredit certain electoral observers.

A recent Amnesty International mission to Zimbabwe documented widespread human rights violations including arbitrary killings, torture and ill-treatment. These are believed to have caused a pervasive atmosphere of fear and intimidation which in turn is hampering the rights to freedom of assembly, association, movement and expression.

"The current climate of terror in Zimbabwe is creating an atmosphere in which free and fair elections are not possible," Maina Kiai said.

"International monitors and observers of the Zimbabwean elections must not be *silent witnesses*," Amnesty International urged. "They must be prepared to raise issues of human rights violations or police inaction with the Zimbabwean authorities, as well as publicly condemning human rights violations during and after the elections."

"The Zimbabwean government should take urgent steps to ensure that everyone is able to exercise these rights over the election weekend without fear of becoming a victim of human rights violations."

Amnesty International is calling on all those observing the elections to pay particular attention to the following points:

Protection of local observers

National NGOs have run non-partisan voter education workshops and trained local observers to monitor the elections. Their work has been interpreted as indicating support for opposition parties and as a result many civic education workers have been harassed and assaulted. International observers should seek effective ways of protecting local observers from politically motivated assaults, for example by "twinning" with national observers to jointly monitor the same polling station or area.

Climate of the elections

Observers should have access to all Zimbabwe and all sectors of the population since violations often occur far away from polling stations. There should not only be monitoring of the actual voting procedure but of the environment and human rights conditions away from the polling stations as well, including the behaviour of the police and security forces and any speeches made by political party officials.

Access

On the days of the voting, election observers should have unhindered access to all polling stations, to be able to observe any human rights abuses, such as violence against those presumed to be opposing party supporters and intimidation of voters including threats and assertions that their voting is not a secret.

Post-electoral monitoring

Observers should record human rights violations that occur both before and after the actual dates of polling but which have a direct bearing upon the ability of people to exercise their rights. A sizeable and effective international monitoring presence should remain in the country for as long as necessary after the elections to help ensure that the aftermath is free from human rights abuses and, if it is not, to continue publicly reporting and lobbying for problems to be addressed.

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