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Swaziland: Amnesty International condemns use of excessive force against media workers and political activists by prison officials

Amnesty International today urged the government of Swaziland to institute a judicially-led public inquiry into the violent attack, on 21 September, by Correctional Services security officers on journalists and political activists at Matsapha Central Correctional Institute.

The attack by prison security officers occurred shortly after the court acquittal on terrorism charges of opposition leader Mario Masuku.

Amnesty International said that the actions were violations of the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and information. In several cases, the extent and targeted nature of the assaults constituted ill-treatment and violated the prohibition against torture.

According to eyewitnesses, the security officers reacted aggressively to the presence at the prison gate of some 50 noisy but peaceful, unarmed supporters awaiting Mario Masuku's release from the prison. Television and print-media journalists were standing near them. Without any official warning to disperse, security officers charged into the group at the gate. They severely assaulted a number of leading political activists and demanded that the journalists stop filming and photographing their actions. They seized cameras and other reporting equipment and verbally abused, threatened and physically assaulted several journalists.

One of those singled out for assault was political activist Wandile Dlodlu, who had tried to run from the scene when the security officers started hitting and kicking him. They chased and caught him, then beat him with their fists and booted feet until he fell to the ground. He tried to cover his head with his hands but sustained injuries to his head, eyes, mouth and nose, as well as on other parts of his body. Eventually a number of senior prison security officers intervened to try to surround and protect him. He was taken to a local hospital by his colleagues. At the time of this assault, Wandile Dlodlu was still recovering from injuries he sustained 17 days earlier when he had been unlawfully arrested and allegedly tortured by police before being released uncharged.

Amnesty International is appealing to the government to ensure that prison security officers suspected to have used excessive force against the political activists and journalists are subjected to disciplinary and criminal investigations. There should be no impunity for human rights violations. The government should ensure that the rights protected under regional and international human rights treaties to which Swaziland is party and under the Constitution should be respected, protected and fulfilled. It should affirm publicly the right of journalists to conduct their work without harassment, intimidation and violence.

Background

On 21 September 2009 the High Court acquitted Mario Masuku of a charge brought against him under the Suppression of Terrorism Act (STA) of 2008. The acquittal occurred on the first day of

the trial and at the conclusion of the State's case. The court found that the state's evidence was either inadmissible or failed to prove their case against the accused. Mario Masuku had been arrested under the STA on 15 November 2008, the day after his organization, PUDEMO (Peoples United Democratic Movement), and three other organizations were declared illegal under the STA. In January 2009 Amnesty International and the Human Rights Institute of the International Bar Association issued a report which concluded that certain provisions of the STA were inherently repressive, breach Swaziland's obligations under international and regional human rights law and the Swaziland Constitution, and were already leading to violations of the rights of freedom of expression, association and assembly [Please see: *Suppression of Terrorism Act Undermines Human Rights in Swaziland* <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR55/001/2009/en>]

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