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### **Zimbabwe: Amnesty International calls for a strong line from the Commonwealth as human rights abuses intensify**

With the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) teleconference set for 20 December, Amnesty International reiterates its call for all possible international influence to focus on persuading the Zimbabwean government to reverse its policy of political violence and intimidation.

"The situation in Zimbabwe is getting worse day by day as the Presidential elections draw nearer. The government of Robert Mugabe is determined to remain in power by any means, including harassment, arbitrary arrests, assaults and killings of anyone who stand in their way," the organisation said. "This is not about land reform but about rampant torture by the state and its proxies to bludgeon dissent."

An Amnesty International delegation recently ended a visit to the country where it met with victims of torture and beatings, human rights activists, farmers and farm workers, as well as members of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and the Zimbabwe Police Force and army.

Amnesty International concludes that the government of Zimbabwe is using informal, but state-sponsored militia -- comprising land occupiers, so-called 'war veterans' and supporters of ZANU-PF -- as proxy forces to brutalize and displace farm workers and to assault real or perceived members of the opposition.

#### **Killings**

In one of the most disturbing cases, Augustus Chacha, an MDC youth activist who was scheduled to meet the Amnesty International delegation, was found dead in a reservoir in Gonye village near the town of Mberengwa. No one has been charged in relation to his killing, which his family believes was politically-motivated.

#### **Torture**

The delegation also interviewed torture victims from the Chimanimani area in northeastern Zimbabwe. In mid-November 2001, "war veterans" and ZANU-PF supporters, allegedly coordinated by the Central Intelligence Organisation, abducted a man who asked to remain anonymous. They beat him and a friend into unconsciousness with whips, fists and electrical cords, then urinated in their victims' faces and threw sand in their eyes, while questioning them about their activities in the MDC. When the victims regained consciousness, their torturers placed them on the road, under the tyres of a Landrover and threatened to run them over if they did not swear allegiance to ZANU-PF.

#### **Arbitrary Arrests**

Opposition activists have also been subject to what Amnesty International considers to be politically-motivated arrests and prosecution. Some twenty MDC officials and staff members in Bulawayo were arrested in November and December 2001 in relation with the abduction and

murder of Cain Nkala, leader of the local branch of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association. Amnesty International condemns Cain Nkala's political killing, and calls for an impartial, thorough investigation of all political killings in Zimbabwe. The High Court of Zimbabwe has heard the stories of four of the detainees -- Kethani Sibanda, Remember Moyo, Sazini Mpfu and Gilbert Moyo – as they described how police tortured them into implicating themselves and six other MDC officials, including MDC MP Fletcher Dulini Ncube. Whilst in prison, Fletcher Dulini Ncube's health deteriorated rapidly. He lost sight in both eyes, and hearing in an ear, due to the denial of appropriate food and needed medicines for his diabetes.

### **Suppression of the Right of Assembly**

The Amnesty International delegation also witnessed the selective suppression of the right to assembly. On 22 November, police arrested and detained 33 people trying to march down a Harare street in a peaceful demonstration against proposed changes to Zimbabwe's electoral law. Armed riot police assaulted protestors with batons, and arrested them for obstructing traffic. The charge was then changed to public violence. A few days later, a number of "war veterans" staged a march through central Harare escorted by two police vehicles. This police partiality echoed the police escort given to "war veterans" who rampaged through downtown Bulawayo on 16 November, beating bystanders and burning down the MDC party headquarters there.

### **Threats to the Judiciary and Media**

Amnesty International is also extremely concerned about the erosion of the independence of the judiciary and threats to the independent media, including arbitrary arrests of journalists and attempts to suppress the circulation of their newspapers. The government has also tried to legitimise illegal acts of repression by introducing draconian new laws, such as the Public Order and Security Act that allows indefinite detention and the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Bill 2001 bill that criminalizes journalism not authorized by the state.

"The current pattern of severe human rights violations should be fully recognised as part of a political campaign to eliminate opposition and secure a victory for ZANU-PF in the upcoming Presidential elections," the organization said, reiterating its call made after the announcement of the Commonwealth-brokered Abuja agreement in September. "Free and fair elections in 2002 will be measured by the extent to which the Zimbabwe government provides an atmosphere in which all people, including opposition candidates and supporters, are free to express their political beliefs, peacefully assemble and campaign without the fear of violence."

Amnesty International acknowledges that the Commonwealth takes the situation in Zimbabwe seriously, but fears that a statement released at the conclusion of a visit to Zimbabwe in October 2001 was diluted under pressure from the Zimbabwean authorities. The statement did not reflect the very real and deteriorating human rights crisis that continues in Zimbabwe.

Evidence gathered by the recent Amnesty International delegation to Zimbabwe indicates strongly that the government of Zimbabwe is not responding to international pressure to comply with its regional and international human rights obligations, including by taking effective and decisive action to stop its state-sponsored militias from intimidating and attacking opposition activists, farmers, farm workers and other Zimbabwean citizens.

Amnesty International said the Commonwealth should send election observers to Zimbabwe at the earliest possible date, and in far larger numbers than last year's delegation – to compensate for Zimbabwe's ban on monitors coming from the European Union and international electoral groups.

### **Background**

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group was set up in 1995 to monitor adherence to the 1991 Harare Declaration, which outlines the organisation's core principles, including respect for fundamental human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary.

After the human rights situation in Zimbabwe was made an extraordinary agenda item of the March 2001 meeting of CMAG, the Commonwealth sought to be allowed to visit the country. The Commonwealth's concerns were repeated at the September 2001 meeting of CMAG. An initiative of President Obasanjo of Nigeria later in September resulted in the Abuja agreement between the government of Zimbabwe and the Commonwealth, in which respect for the rule of law and a cessation of land invasions was promised in return for the release of British funds to support the process of land reform.

On 11 December 2001, President Robert Mugabe announced that Presidential elections would be held in March 2002. At what amounted to ZANU-PF's first election rally, President Mugabe called on his party's supporters to "move like a military machine and move forward...[w]e have to go away from this conference a transformed people. This conference should transform us into soldiers of ZANU-PF".

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