

7 September 2001

AI Index AFR 46/009/2001 - News Service Nr. 159

Zimbabwe: International scrutiny needed for Zimbabwe-Commonwealth pact

An upcoming parliamentary by-election in rural Zimbabwe will be the first true test of the willingness of the government to abide by Thursday's agreement in Nigeria to end political violence.

Amnesty International cautiously welcomes the agreement reached by the Commonwealth delegation and the Zimbabwean government in Abuja, Nigeria, in which the Zimbabwean authorities pledged commitment to the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration. The Declaration calls on Commonwealth countries to work for "the protection and promotion of the fundamental political values of the Commonwealth," including the rule of law and all fundamental human rights.

"For the Abuja agreement to be successful, the Zimbabwe government should provide 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 said.

The human rights climate in the next by-election, due on 22 and 23 September in the Chikomba constituency in the Mashonaland East Province of Zimbabwe will be the first true test of the willingness of the government to abide by Thursday's agreement to end political violence.

The agreement has come too late to prevent human rights violations in the Makoni West constituency, where the run-up to this weekend's polling on 8 and 9 September has been marked by beatings, burning of houses and forcible displacement.

Previous parliamentary by-elections in rural constituencies have been marred by human rights violations against those suspected of supporting the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MCD) -- most recently, the by-election in Bindura on 28-29 July.

In the run-up to this weekend's polling in Makoni West, supporters of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) have used political violence to curtail freedom of residents not openly expressing support for the government.

"Members of the Commonwealth delegation to Abuja, including representatives of Kenya, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, should closely monitor the run-up to the Chikomba balloting to ensure that human rights are respected," Amnesty International urged.

The organization is also appealing to the Commonwealth and the broader international community to send observers as a matter of urgency to monitor the human rights situation in Zimbabwe. Amnesty International is concerned that the months preceding the presidential election due in 2002 will likely be marked by an upsurge in human rights violations. Thus the process of sending monitors should start as soon as possible, according to Amnesty International.

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