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Zimbabwe: Peaceful protestors released

The Zimbabwe Police released from police custody at least 40 women who were arbitrarily arrested on 27 October during a peaceful protest outside the venue of a meeting between the country's top leaders and their Southern African counterparts. The women, many of whom were in their 60s, were released at about 9pm last night.

Those arrested were members of the Women's Coalition, an organization working for the equality of women. They were peacefully praying and protesting outside the Rainbow Towers Hotel in Harare as President Robert Mugabe, Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara met with leaders from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to discuss the country's power-sharing deal, which the protestors argue has been too slow in achieving any progress.

They were charged with "disorderly conduct in a public place" under the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act [Chapter 9:23] and released after paying a fine. They were initially denied access to a lawyer. They only were able to speak with a lawyer for a couple of minutes as they were getting their lunch. Their colleagues were able to bring in food, sanitary pads and painkillers for the women.

At least 30 people were also injured when the police used tear gas and batons to disperse protestors. The majority of those injured were women from the Women's Coalition. Their injuries were consistent with being beaten with batons, falls during flight, teargas inhalation and other injuries. One activist was admitted at a private clinic for observation after inhaling teargas and experiencing respiratory distress. Four others were admitted for severe injuries and suspected fractures.

Protestors from other organizations including student, youth and other human rights groups, were also beaten by the police with batons, exposed to tear gas and some had to receive medical treatment for their injuries.

Amnesty International condemns the continued arbitrary arrest, detention and use of excessive force against peaceful protestors by police. Amnesty International also calls on the Southern African Development Community leaders to speak out against human rights violations and demand an end to the suppression of the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression and association.

Note to Editors

Also on 27 October, prisoners of conscience Jenni Williams and Magodonga Mahlangu, leaders of the activist organisation Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), were denied bail following their arrest on 16 October 2008. They are being held at Mlondolozhi Prison, where conditions are said to fall well below international standards.

The two activists were arbitrarily arrested after participating in a peaceful protest outside Mhlahlandlela Government Complex in Bulawayo, in which they were demanding access to food aid in Zimbabwe. Police used excessive force to break up the peaceful protest by about 200 WOZA activists. Magodonga Mahlangu was beaten by police during her arrest and is reported to be in pain. They are lodging appeals with the high court.

Amnesty International considers Jenni Williams and Magodonga Mahlangu to be prisoners of conscience and calls for their immediate and unconditional release. Their arrest is part of the government of Zimbabwe's clampdown on human rights defenders who are campaigning to highlight the suffering of the people of Zimbabwe.

On 31 October 2008 Amnesty International will publish a new report, Zimbabwe: Time for Accountability (AI Index: AFR 46/028/2008) emphasizing the need to address the country's legacy of impunity for human rights violations.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: press@amnesty.org

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK
www.amnesty.org