

AI INDEX: AFR 63/10/97
31 OCTOBER 1997

ZAMBIA: Coup attempt must not lead to arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment

An attempted coup by military officers should not be used to justify a crack-down on the political opposition and brutal treatment of those arrested, Amnesty International said today.

The attempted coup that began in the early morning hours of Tuesday 28 October came to an end a few hours later, when a group of Zambian army commandos stormed the Mass Media Complex where army Captain Steven Lungu had seized the national radio station. The following day, a state of emergency was declared by President Frederick Chiluba.

Eighteen people have been arrested so far in connection with the attempted coup. The latest arrest came this morning when opposition leader Dean Mung'oma was detained by eight police officers. According to officials at the Zambia Democratic Congress office, they took Mung'oma away. His lawyers reportedly have not been able to see their client at the Zambia Police Headquarters in Lusaka. The charges against him are not known.

On Thursday, President Chiluba said many more people may have been involved in this week's aborted coup d'etat, over and above the group of soldiers already arrested. He hinted that further arrests were likely. Opposition politicians, however, say the state of emergency has been declared to settle old scores with political opponents.

Amnesty International also fears that those arrested are being ill-treated. Coup leader Captain Steven Lungu was filmed by the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation on Tuesday as his chest was trampled on by an army officer. Torture and ill-treatment of criminal suspects is forbidden both by Zambian law and by international human rights treaties to which Zambia is a party.

The last time President Chiluba declared a state of emergency in early March 1993, an eventual total of 26 opposition party members were arrested. At least two were tortured, according to the government's own commission of inquiry. That state of emergency was prompted by the public revelation of a document called the "Zero Option" which detailed an alleged plot by an opposition party to make the country ungovernable. Eventually all 26 were acquitted.

"We had the Zero Option, maybe we moved too fast and lost the case in court," President Chiluba said Thursday. *"This time the evidence is there. We found them in action. But the courts will have to try them. I see a silver lining in this cloud".*

Amnesty International has asked the Government of Zambia to make sure those arrested are not ill-treated while in detention, that they are given immediate access to their lawyers and doctors. The human rights organization also urged that all detainees held under the state of emergency should be charged promptly with a recognizably criminal offence and be fairly tried or otherwise released.

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