

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 46/023/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 134

Embargo Date: 25 July 2007 00:01 GMT

Zimbabwe: Women at the forefront of challenging government policy face increasing repression

Zimbabwean women are suffering increasing repression as they mobilize to confront the government in the face of a spiralling economic and social rights crisis in Zimbabwe, according to a new report released today by Amnesty International.

In the report, the organization released the findings of a three-week research mission during which Amnesty International's delegates interviewed scores of women of all ages throughout Zimbabwe, from both townships and rural areas.

"The Zimbabwean government needs to address the underlying economic and social problems that are motivating women to protest -- rather than attacking them and criminalising their legitimate activities in defence of human rights," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

While in Zimbabwe, Amnesty International spoke to women activists who make up the majority of the hundreds of Zimbabwean human rights defenders who have been arbitrarily arrested and detained for engaging in peaceful protest marches or meetings in the last two years. Delegates spoke to many women who became human rights defenders following repeated violations of their rights by the Zimbabwean government.

Most women interviewed by Amnesty International reported being subjected to beatings and other ill-treatment while in police custody, in some cases amounting to torture. Much of the abuse has included sexist verbal abuse and derogatory accusations aimed at discrediting their character and work. Some have been detained with their children or while pregnant in deplorable conditions falling far below international human rights standards.

"Zimbabwean women have demonstrated incredible resilience, bravery and determination in the face of increasing government repression. They are aware of the dangers they face but refuse to be intimidated into submission," said Irene Khan.

Women activists told Amnesty International that police often accuse them of being used by the British and American governments to overthrow the Zimbabwean government and of being agents of regime change. This is often followed by random beatings, with some women suffering serious injuries, including broken limbs.

"The Zimbabwean government is not only making false accusations against women activists, it is also failing to acknowledge its role in creating the desperate situation in which these women find themselves," said Irene Khan. "One way in which the government is doing this is by trying to deny a direct causal relationship between its policies and the deepening poverty and spiralling human rights crisis in the country."

Clara, a 60-year-old widow in Masvingo province, is a member of the Women's Coalition -- a national women's human rights organization. In 2003, Clara spoke out against discrimination against perceived supporters of opposition parties in food aid distribution in her village at a community meeting. She was accused by local ruling party officials of being a member of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). To this day, Clara is still not allowed to buy Grain Marketing Board (GMB) maize.

"Women in Zimbabwe are demanding respect and protection for their own human rights and the rights of members of their communities -- often in the face of severe repression, including arbitrary arrest and torture," said Irene Khan.

"The treatment of women human rights activists while in custody has had dire consequences for the women and their families -- particularly for the children left behind without care."

Women from both rural and urban areas in Zimbabwe are finding it increasingly difficult to buy food, pay for medical care and earn a living to support their families. The majority of those affected by the government's clampdown on the informal business sector in 2005 are poor women.

Amnesty International delegates witnessed the desperation caused by daily increases of prices of basic goods such as food and transport, while most people's wages remained static. In every location visited by the organization, women were desperately trying to sell their goods, while at the same time trying to avoid being arrested and having their goods confiscated by police.

Many women human rights defenders are not allowed to buy maize from the GMB simply because they belong to human rights organizations or speak out against discrimination or other violations in their communities -- in violation of their right to adequate food.

"Heads of state in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) need to redouble their efforts to end human rights violations in Zimbabwe," said Irene Khan. "At their next summit meeting in Zambia in August 2007, SADC leaders should insist that President Mugabe immediately stop the intimidation, ill-treatment, torture and harassment of critics of government policies."

"Women activists are an important resource for the development of Zimbabwe and must be seen as such by the government. They play a pivotal role in addressing the many human rights challenges the country is facing. The government must acknowledge the legitimacy of their work and stamp out any discrimination against women."

Note to editors:

Amnesty International delegates made several requests for meetings with government officials to discuss their concerns -- both in person and in writing -- but were refused an interview on all occasions.

To see a copy of the full report, *Zimbabwe: Between a rock and a hard place - women human rights defenders at risk*, please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf460172007>

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