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Zimbabwe: NGO Act is an outrageous attack on human rights

Amnesty International is outraged at the enactment, yesterday, of a new law, which bans foreign human rights organizations from working in Zimbabwe and could be used to close down local human rights groups.

"The law is a direct attack on human rights in Zimbabwe and should be immediately repealed," Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Program, urged today, International Human Rights Day.

The Non-governmental Organizations Act (NGO Act) specifically targets organizations that "promote and protect human rights". The Act also gives the government sweeping powers to interfere with the operations of any NGO in Zimbabwe through a government-appointed NGO Council. Under the Act, Zimbabwean NGOs are prohibited from receiving any foreign funding to engage in human rights work.

"Preventing local NGOs from receiving foreign funding for human rights work would effectively mean the end of many vital human rights programs, as there is so little local funding available," Kolawole Olaniyan said. "This Act is a disaster for victims of human rights violations and human rights defenders. It is wholly inconsistent with Zimbabwe's obligations under international human rights laws to which it is party. We have grave fears that those organizations that have done most to raise awareness of the human rights situation in Zimbabwe will now be targeted for closure," he added.

Amnesty International believes that the legislation will be applied selectively, as has been the case with other repressive legislation introduced over the last four years. The Media Information Commission established by the 2002 Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) has already overseen severe repression of independent media in Zimbabwe.

"If the NGO Act is enforced across the board, tens of thousands of people being assisted by NGO programs could suffer. Reputable and dedicated human rights organizations in Zimbabwe provide vital medical and psychological care and legal advice to victims of human rights violations. Most victims have nowhere else to turn in a country where unemployment is above 70 per cent and the health service has been severely eroded," Kolawole Olaniyan said.

The NGO Act replaces the Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO) Act, itself a very repressive law introduced during the colonial period.

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate repeal of the NGO Act. Any legislation governing the operation of NGOs must be consistent with Zimbabwe's human rights obligations.

Background

On 9 December 2004 the Parliament of Zimbabwe also enacted the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission Act and the Criminal Law Codification and Reform Act, both of which also contain clauses that violate internationally recognized human rights.

Public Document

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