

Zambia: Press freedom under siege

The Zambian government's crackdown on the independent *Post* newspaper's staff and offices is an unacceptable assault on freedom of speech which should be unequivocally condemned by the international community, Amnesty International said today.

The crackdown follows a lead article published by the *Post* on 9 March, entitled "Angola Worries Zambia Army", which described Zambia's low military capabilities and unpreparedness in the face of a possible military threat from Angola.

"Not only have a group of independent journalists been targeted and victimised simply for doing their legitimate work -- press freedom in Zambia as a whole is now under siege as a result of the authorities' outright suppression of free speech," Amnesty International said.

"Any real or perceived threats to the country's security should be dealt with through the legal system, not by illegal arrests and incommunicado detentions."

At least seven journalists have been arrested in police raids on their homes and detained without charge in the last two days. The whereabouts of three detainees -- Amos Malupenga, Goodson Machona and Macpherson Muyumba -- remains unknown. They could be at risk of ill-treatment by police if they are prevented from contact with their lawyers.

Armed police have surrounded the newspaper buildings, holding more than 25 staff members under siege at gun-point. While some 15 people detained at the *Post*'s printing plant have been allowed to leave, eight newspaper staff remain in detention at its separate editorial offices, where electricity and water supplies have been cut off and padlocks placed on the gates -- the sole entrance.

"The Zambian police have in the past used brutal violence against those they consider to be enemies of the government," Amnesty International said. "We are therefore urging the police not to ill-treat those arrested or sought for arrest in this case."

On 9 March, National Assembly Deputy Speaker Simon Mwila reportedly called the article "deeply unpatriotic" and asked Defence Minister Chitalu Sampa to take appropriate action. Another member of parliament also felt that such a detailed article about Zambia's weaponry had "undressed us as a country".

These comments come in the context of an increasingly tense relationship between Angola and Zambia in recent weeks due to Angola's allegations of Zambian government ministers' involvement in arms smuggling to UNITA.

A court hearing called on 11 March, at which all those detained should have appeared, has been postponed until 12 March. This delay violates Zambian law, which says suspects must be charged or released within 24 hours of arrest.

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