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Zimbabwe: Orchestrated campaign targetting opposition intensifies in run up to local elections

Amnesty International strongly condemns the renewed wave of state-sponsored violence and intimidation of real or perceived opponents in the run-up to country-wide local council elections scheduled for 28 and 29 September.

"Intimidation and harassment of opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) candidates is escalating. This is yet another orchestrated campaign to target the opposition through the use of violence" the organization said.

According to the MDC, approximately 698 MDC candidates out of 1,397 who intended to contest the local council elections have withdrawn largely in response to threats, intimidation and violence perpetrated by government authorities and state-sponsored 'militia'.

"The government should stop these daily human rights violations and bring perpetrators of these violations to justice," Amnesty International said.

The 5 September deadline for nominations for the local council elections was marred by several incidents of intimidation and attacks on MDC candidates and supporters. For example:

Onias Midzi, an MDC youth member, was murdered by two men in soldiers' uniforms on 5 September when he returned from accompanying MDC candidates to the nomination offices at Manhenga Business Centre, outside of Bindura, Mashonaland Central. He was assaulted with fists and broomsticks and his head was reportedly hit against an army vehicle. The police have arrested two men but have not released their names.

On the same day, two MDC candidates, Michael Chitsama and Johannes Chongore, from Zaka West, Masvingo, were reportedly attacked by ZANU-PF supporters at the Zaka registration offices when they submitted their papers for nomination. It is not yet clear if there have been any arrests in connection with the attacks. Fourteen other MDC candidates for Zaka West were not permitted to register on the basis that they had not submitted their nomination papers in person, though this is not constitutional grounds for exclusion from candidacy.

Also on 5 September, 200 Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) supporters assaulted Stephen Nyikadzino, the MDC secretary for Chitungwiza, who was assisting MDC candidates to register at the offices of the Chegutu council. Nyikadzino sustained injuries to his head and back, and was hospitalized for two days. No one has been arrested in connection with his attack.

Also at the Chegutu council offices, Hilda Mafudza, the MDC MP for Mhondoro, was surrounded

by ZANU-PF supporters and forced to lock herself in her car for protection.

Wilson Mabhera, MDC candidate in the local council elections representing Hurungwe West, Mashonaland West province, was abducted and beaten by ZANU-PF supporters on 16 August. He sustained injuries to his head and back and was hospitalized. He has since been released from hospital. No one has been arrested in connection with his attack.

The parliamentary by-election in Hurungwe West, scheduled for 28 and 29 September, has also been characterized by threats and intimidation of MDC officials by ZANU-PF supporters. In Hurungwe West, a gang of six ZANU-PF supporters has been intimidating those believed to be MDC supporters, making it difficult for the MDC candidate, Justin Dandawa, to campaign freely without fear of attack.

"The international community, particularly Zimbabwe's neighbours in Southern Africa, must intensify pressure on President Robert Mugabe by giving a clear signal that human rights violations will not be tolerated," the organization said.

Background

The Hurungwe West by-election is taking place following the death of the previous incumbent, ZANU-PF MP Marko Madiro.

Only 699 MDC candidates out of a total of 1,397 successfully submitted their papers for nomination for the local council elections. Approximately 698 failed to register, largely in response to on-going threats, intimidation and harassment. Many were also unable to submit their papers as a result of registration problems experienced due to legislation introduced by the government in August requiring candidates to have long form birth certificates, which many Zimbabweans do not have. In addition, there was confusion stemming from last-minute changes in the location of nomination courts as well as an increase in the official number of wards, originally set at 1,397 but increased at the last minute to 1,425 without notification to the MDC. As a result, the MDC was unable to field candidates for the additional 28 wards.

According to the latest report of the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, organized political violence prevailed across the country during the month of August with 35 reported cases of political intimidation, 23 assaults, 7 cases of torture and one murder.

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