

Zimbabwe: Amnesty International calls for international observers

State-sponsored repression, including political killings and torture, continues to worsen in Zimbabwe, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

The new Amnesty International report appeals to the European Union and the Commonwealth to send international observers as soon as possible, ahead of the Presidential elections due before April 2002. It is being released in advance of the 29 October meetings in Brussels of EU foreign affairs ministers in the Council of the European Union (EU) and of the Joint Parliamentary Assembly of the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of States and the EU.

Zimbabwean human rights organizations have reported as many as 50 politically motivated killings since early 2000 and more political killings took place during several by-elections in September 2001. Amnesty International fears the situation will deteriorate if the international community does not take preventive action.

"Despite human rights benchmarks being set for Zimbabwe in the Abuja and Cotonou Agreements, the human rights situation remains serious and without expected improvement. A pattern of political repression by the ruling party in the run-up to elections has been repeated last month, and will likely be repeated again in the months ahead," the organization said.*

The human rights violations have been carried out predominantly by "war veterans" and other supporters of the ruling party, and in some cases with the complicity or active involvement of the police.

Supporters of the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF), have reportedly set up secret locations where they intimidate, assault and torture opposition supporters. There are also reports that opposition supporters have been assaulted in police stations.

One man told a human rights organization that he was abducted from his home in Harare in April this year, taken to a location on the outskirts of town and tortured for having distributed opposition party cards. He stated that his assailants used red-hot chains from a fire to burn an "X" on his back and set on fire Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party T-shirts they had seized from his home.

In a September by-election in the central Zimbabwe district of Chikomba, the MDC candidate was threatened with death and remained in hiding. Witnesses in the community heard the screams of a primary school headmaster being beaten to death by suspected ZANU–PF supporters, who also allegedly abducted three other men, forcing them to strip naked and to beat each other with whips. Another kidnap victim later identified the police officers and state intelligence agents who beat him with police batons and attempted to drown him in a river.

Journalists attempting to carry out critical and independent reporting continue to be subjected to harassment, including violence and death threats as well as criminal charges fabricated to hamper their work. Amnesty International is extremely concerned for the safety of journalists and reiterates calls for the authorities to ensure their safety.

In the past 18 months, "war veterans", ruling party supporters and those who have taken over white-owned farms have forced up to 70,000 black farm workers to leave their homes. A Zimbabwean human

rights group reported that a farm worker in Waterfalls, near Harare, was beaten to death on 12 June 2001 by "war veterans". It appeared that nearby police officers ignored the killing at the time and journalists with the state-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation television crew looked the other way.

Members of the police, intelligence services, pro-government "war veterans" and other ruling party supporters consistently escape accountability. Police have not only failed to maintain law and order but often have directly participated in human rights violations.

Amnesty International's report sets out recommendations to the Commonwealth and the EU. It is urging the EU and the Commonwealth to send international observers as soon as possible ahead of next year's presidential elections, publicly condemn the ongoing violence, provide training and resource support for local human rights non-governmental organizations monitoring human rights, and asking the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) to visit the country.

* The 6 September 2001 Abuja Agreement was reached by Commonwealth nations in response to widespread human rights violations and land seizures. The June 2000 Cotonou Agreement created a partnership between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific countries.

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