

ZIMBABWEAn estimated 1400 people

Around 1,400 people have been arrested during Zimbabwe's presidential election, and are detained without charge in dangerous and overcrowded conditions that could be life-threatening. Those in custody are opposition party polling agents (who monitor vote-counting), independent election observers and Zimbabwean citizens perceived to be supporters of the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

Polling was to have taken two days, 9-10 March, but the limited number of polling stations and the slow voting procedure meant that thousands of people were still lining up to vote when the stations closed on 10 March, particularly in the capital, Harare, and the densely-populated nearby town of Chitungwiza. That day a High Court judge had ordered that all polling stations should remain open for a third day, Monday 11 March, but the government opened only the polling stations in Harare and Chitungwiza, where elections were underway for the mayor and city council as well as for the president. At some polling stations in Chitungwiza police used tear gas to disperse angry would-be voters after the High court denied a last-minute petition by the MDC for the polls to remain open until Tuesday 12 March to allow everyone still queuing to vote.

At 9pm on 11 March an estimated 800 people were in custody at Harare Central Police Station. They had not been fed, and the cells were so overcrowded that they could not lie down to sleep. Many detainees were being held in a large open courtyard waiting to be taken to other police stations, which were already crowded.

Among those arrested were activists from a coalition of non-governmental organizations, the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), which had trained some 12,500 people as election observers. The government would only accredit some 200 of them, so many hundreds more were deployed as unaccredited monitors who by law had to remain at least 100 metres from polling stations. Police and officers from the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) have reportedly been ordered to harass and detain ZESN monitors.

Some of those detained are suspected of trying to vote twice. Police admitted that they have only circumstantial evidence and no definite criminal charge to justify the arrests.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In the year leading up to the election, supporters of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), and paramilitary groups sponsored by them, have carried out serious human rights violations, including abductions, torture and political killings. Since January 2002, the violence has intensified, as the government has given military training to over 1,000 National Youth Service members, who began beating and torturing those perceived to be supporters of the MDC.

The elections have been characterized by intimidation and government attempts to prevent proper monitoring of the election process. In the early hours of 8 March, militias across the country set up illegal roadblocks to prevent the MDC from deploying its polling agents, in a campaign apparently directed by the government. Amnesty International received dozens of reports of attacks, often resulting in serious injuries.

As voting got under way, Amnesty International received reports that militia members were trying to prevent potential opposition supporters from voting. Two men in Karoi, Mashonaland Central, were beaten for over an hour by militia members because they had allegedly been driven to the polling station at Tovoy Farm by a white person. An MDC polling agent in Karoi was abducted by ZANU-PF youth during a lunch break and badly beaten all over his body and on the soles of his feet.

The government moved many polling stations around 48 hours before polling began, to locations either remote from communities perceived to be sympathetic to the opposition or that had been previously used by state-sponsored militia and ZANU-PF as bases for their harassment and assaults on communities. Amnesty International has received numerous reports of assaults by them during the voting.

As voting ended and ballots were readied for counting, there was a dramatic escalation in arrests of accredited polling agents for the MDC or unaccredited observers from non-governmental organisations. In Manicaland Province police arrested 130 polling agents and observers. In the town of Murambinda alone, 27 MDC and ZESN observers were detained and denied access to lawyers. Within an hour, 50 people were arrested in the town of Mutoko in Mashonaland East Province, another 300 in the Harare Suburb of Mabvuku, with hundreds more arrested in the Harare suburb of Mabelreign.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing serious concern that up to 1,400 people are held in police cells around the country in congested conditions that constitute a risk to their health;
- pointing out that a large number of those arrested appear to be polling agents or members of NGOs whose function is to ensure proper voting procedure;
- asking the government to either charge the detainees with a recognizably criminal offence on the basis of solid evidence, or release them immediately;
- pointing out that under normal legal procedure, those who are charged with misdemeanour crimes should be released on their own recognizance or granted bail forthwith, particularly since they are held in such overcrowded conditions.

APPEALS TO:

President

His Excellency The Hon Robert G Mugabe
Office of the President
Munhumutapa Building
Box 7700
Causeway
Harare
Zimbabwe

Fax:+ 263 4 708820 / 708557

Salutation:Your Excellency

Minister of State for Information and Publicity

The Hon Jonathan Moyo
Ministry of State
and Publicity in the Office
of the President

10th Floor Linqunda House
PO Box CY 825
Causeway
Harare
Zimbabwe

Fax: + 263 4 707213

Salutation: Dear Minister

Minister of Home Affairs
The Hon John Nkomo
Ministry of Home Affairs
11th Floor Mukwati Building
Private Bag 7703
Causeway
Harare
Zimbabwe

Fax: + 263 4 726 716

Salutation: Dear Minister

Police Commissioner
Mr Augustine Chihuri
Police Headquarters
PO Box 8807
Causeway
Harare
Zimbabwe

Fax: + 263 4 728 768

Salutation: Dear Commissioner

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Zimbabwe accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 18 March 2002.