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Zimbabwe: Political violence intensifies ahead of September local elections

In the run-up to local council elections in September, Amnesty International is deeply concerned that the pattern of using violence against the political opposition and abusing the neutrality of the police by government and state-sponsored "militia" will be repeated.

Between 28 and 29 July, seven MDC members were arrested allegedly for setting fire to three tractors at a government complex in Chipinge North. The seven accused, including the MDC vice-chairman for Manicaland, Prosper Mucheyami, and the MDC candidate for Chimanimani, Michael Shane Kidd, remained in police custody until 5 August, when they were each granted bail of Zim\$20,000. While in detention they were reportedly subjected to verbal threats and psychological intimidation by police officials. In his ruling for bail, Magistrate T. Khumalo stated that there was no connection between the burning of the tractors and the seven accused. Both Mutseyami and Shane Kidd have been repeatedly arrested and harassed by police and ZANU-PF supporters, frequently organised in state-sponsored "militias", over the past two years.

The pattern of growing repression in the run up to elections in Chimanimani, was matched in the recent mayoral election in Kadoma, Mashonaland West province on 27-28 July when the home of Daniel Mugomba, the initial MDC candidate in the elections, was fire-bombed by suspected ZANU-PF supporters. According to reports, the pre-election period was characterised by intimidation and arbitrary arrests of MDC officials and the bussing in of hundreds of voters to Kadoma. While the ZANU-PF mayoral candidate was declared the winner of the elections, the Zimbabwe Electoral Supervisory Network (ZESN) noted that prior to the election, there were significant incidents of violence and intimidation.

Amnesty International is also concerned about the welfare of Fletcher Dulini-Ncube, MDC Member of Parliament for Lobengula/Magwegwe constituency, Bulawayo arrested on 3 August 2002. Dulini-Ncube was first arrested and charged on 15 November 2001 in relation to the abductions and killings of Cain Nkala and Limukani Lumphahla, supporters of ZANU-PF, found dead on 12 and 17 November of the same year. Dulini-Ncube was released on bail in late December 2001. Before his renewed arrest on 3 August 2002 apparently on grounds that his previous bail conditions had lapsed and he was due to be indicted afresh this week, he was recuperating from the surgical removal of his left eye, and about to return to a local clinic for further treatment. Despite suffering from severe hypertension and diabetes, he was held in police custody without receiving appropriate medical attention and food for one day. Following the submission of a medical statement from his doctor affirming that his condition is life threatening, police officials agreed to return him to hospital, where he is now under police guard.

Shortly after the High Court announced its 8 August decision to indict Dulini-Ncube, prison officials went to the hospital. They removed his hospital clothes and replaced them with a prison uniform and leg irons. According to Article 33 of the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, the use of leg irons is forbidden in this instance. Amnesty International is concerned that the treatment of Dulini-Ncube is incompatible with Zimbabwe's international obligations under Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Article 7 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights which state that everyone has the right to be presumed innocent and treated as innocent until and unless they are convicted according to the law in the course of proceedings which meet at least the minimum prescribed requirements of fairness. Even though Dulini-Ncube is facing criminal charges, he still retains all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to be presumed innocent by a competent court or tribunal, and the right to humane treatment. Amnesty International believes that the ongoing prosecution of Fletcher Dulini-Ncube, including his renewed arrest and detention, and the denial of access to medical care, is solely motivated by his political beliefs and affiliation with the MDC. His treatment confirms the pattern of ongoing repression against the political opposition and abuse of the neutrality of the police by government.

"The human rights situation in Zimbabwe will only improve if the link between political debate and the use of violence is broken," Amnesty International stressed, adding that "[r]ather than suppressing peaceful political opposition, the government of Zimbabwe should uphold international human rights standards that protect the rights to freedom of expression and association."

"The Zimbabwean authorities must ensure that the local government elections in September can take place in a climate free from harassment and violence and that the police carry out their duties in a professional and politically neutral manner," the organization added.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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