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ZAMBIA: ARREST OF POLITICAL OPPONENTS APPEARS POLITICALLY MOTIVATED

The Zambian government appears to be playing political games in the arrest this week of eight members of a Zambian opposition party who are being held on charges of treason, a crime punishable by death, Amnesty International said today.

“The international community will be closely watching to see what evidence has been collected in support of making these arrests on suspicion of treason,” the human rights organization said.

“If these men are, indeed, being held simply because they are opposing the president politically, Amnesty International would consider them prisoners of conscience and would demand their immediate and unconditional release.”

On the evening of 3 June 1996, five members of the United National Independence Party (UNIP) were arrested in connection with recent bomb blasts claimed by the clandestine organization Black Mamba. They include retired Brigadier General Nicholas Zulu, retired Brigadier General Joseph Chintomfwa, former Zambia Air Force captain Selemani Mpangula Banda and Morris Kaulun-g'ombe, a bodyguard for former president Kenneth Kaunda.

On 4 June, police reportedly made further arrests, detaining UNIP Head of Security Patrick Goma, UNIP chairman for finance Rabson Chongo, UNIP press officer Muhabi Lungu, and UNIP vice-president Senior Chief Inyambo Yeta. One man, UNIP vice secretary for Youth Affairs Samson Moyo, was reportedly released the next day.

After a police search of the men's homes, apparently looking for bomb-making materials, guns or incriminating documents, no evidence was reportedly found. Amnesty International's concerns are heightened by the lack of concrete evidence to justify these arrests, which lends weight to this organization's fear the real reason for these men's detention is to prevent them from carrying out their non-violent political activity in line with their beliefs.

“Is there enough evidence to hold them without chance of bail at Lusaka Central Prison, which has notoriously poor prison conditions?” Amnesty International said.

Bail cannot be granted to those charged with treason -- a serious offense that carries the death penalty -- thereby effectively detaining them indefinitely. According to reports received by this organization, the detained men are not being mistreated and have been allowed to see their relatives and lawyers.

Amnesty International is calling for them to receive a fair and prompt trial in accordance with international standards.

In addition to the eight, it is reported that police are seeking to arrest others. Amnesty International is concerned at the prospect of further arrests which may also be based on political motives.

In 1993, Amnesty International protested the detention of UNIP leaders on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government and their lengthy detention without charge. In that case, some UNIP detainees were later released uncharged, while others were acquitted on similarly serious charges, including treason felony and sedition.

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