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Zimbabwe: Treason charges an attack on freedom of expression

Amnesty International today expressed shock that at least 45 Zimbabwean activists have been charged with treason and could face the death penalty following their arrest at a lecture on the protests in North Africa.

Mr Munyaradzi Gwisai, a former opposition parliamentarian, and 44 social justice, trade union and human rights activists were arrested by police on Saturday as they were attending a lecture entitled *Revolt in Egypt and Tunisia. What lessons can be learnt by Zimbabwe and Africa.*

“This is a clear over-reaction by the state to an event in which the participants were exercising their legitimate right to freedom of expression which the government of Zimbabwe must guarantee under national and international law,” said Michelle Kagari, Amnesty International’s deputy director for Africa.

Amnesty International is also alarmed by reports that at least seven of the activists, including Munyaradzi Gwisai, were beaten by security agents while in custody and called on the government to investigate the allegations.

“The safety of detainees remains a serious concern as the Law and Order Section at Harare Central Police station has become notorious for the torture and ill-treatment of activists in their custody,” said Michelle Kagari.

“These persistent abuses demonstrate the need for urgent reform of Zimbabwe’s security sector to bring to an end a culture of impunity for human rights violations and partisan enforcement of the law.”

Defence lawyers told Amnesty International they had been denied the opportunity to consult their clients and they were only informed of the charges facing the activists minutes before they were brought before the court.

The proceedings were adjourned following protests from the lawyers and are expected to resume Monday.

Amnesty International is also concerned about reports that prison officers at the Magistrates court in Harare prevented the defence lawyers from taking instructions from their clients before they were transferred to Harare Remand Prison and Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison.

“This restriction of the right of the activists to access their lawyer is unnecessary and throws serious doubts on the likelihood the detainees will receive a fair trial,” said Michelle Kagari.

“The police continue to selectively apply the law in favour of President Robert Mugabe’s ZANU-PF party.”

Last month ZANU-PF supporters carried out attacks against opposition supporters in Harare’s suburb of

Mbare, but to date, the police have not arrested anyone.

Notes to Editors

- Mr Munyaradzi Gwisai is a former Movement for Democratic Change parliamentarian. He is now a law lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe and the coordinator of the Zimbabwean chapter of the International Socialist Organisation
- The activists are being charged with treason under Section 20 of the Criminal (Codification and Reform) Act [Chapter 9:23] or alternatively “attempting to overthrow the government by unconstitutional means under Section 22(2)(a)(i) of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act.