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Zimbabwe: Prominent human rights lawyer must be released immediately

Prominent human rights lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa must be immediately and unconditionally released, Amnesty International said after she was denied bail in a court appearance on Wednesday.

Mtetwa was arrested on Sunday 17 March when she responded to a client whose home was being searched by police in Harare. She remained in custody despite a High Court order for her immediate release being issued at around 1am Monday morning.

“Beatrice Mtetwa is the unfortunate victim of arbitrary arrest and unlawful detention and must be released immediately,” said Noel Kututwa, Amnesty International’s southern Africa director.

“It’s staggering that while Zimbabwe is in the process of adopting a new constitution which provides a stronger bill of human rights, lawyers in the course of their lawful duty are being so blatantly harassed and intimidated.”

Beatrice Mtetwa responded to the call of a client, Thabani Mpfu, who is a staff member in Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's office, on Sunday morning during a police search of his home. When she arrived at the premises police were already conducting the search.

She asked to be shown the search warrant and when police failed to produce it she told police that what they were doing was "unlawful, unconstitutional, illegal and undemocratic". Police arbitrarily arrested her accusing her of shouting and "obstructing the course of justice". Ms Mtetwa was handcuffed and detained in a police vehicle.

Following her arrest, Beatrice Mtetwa's lawyers obtained a High Court order for her immediate release on the grounds that the arrest was unlawful. Police did not comply with the order and she remained in police custody. During the night, two male police officers entered her cell and attempted to remove her blankets

On Tuesday 19 March Beatrice Mtetwa was brought to the Magistrate’s Court in Harare and she applied for bail. At the hearing Ms Mtetwa's lawyers reported that she was ill-treated while in custody. She was denied access to her family and was denied a bath while in police custody.

The bail hearing concluded today with the denial of bail. Beatrice Mtetwa has been remanded in custody until 3 April.

“Beatrice Mtetwa’s arrest and detention is an attack on the legal profession in Zimbabwe and in particular on lawyers who have fearlessly defended human rights defenders and political activists,” said Kututwa.

“The Zimbabwean authorities must ensure that lawyers are able to perform all of their professional duties without intimidation, hindrance, harassment and improper interference.”

Amnesty International has observed an increase in attacks on the rights of freedom of expression, association and assembly in the run up to the just ended referendum and to Zimbabwe's 2013 general elections.