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Swaziland activists detained ahead of banned protests

Authorities in Swaziland must ensure the safety of four key activists who were detained last night in an apparent bid to disrupt planned protests marches, Amnesty International said today.

The arrests of the activists, which took place at a roadblock near Mbabane last night according to eyewitnesses, follow the Swaziland government's recent announcement that all protests from 12 to 14 April are illegal.

"We are deeply concerned for the safety of these activists, who are held incommunicado and at risk of torture," said Amnesty International's deputy Africa Program Director, Michelle Kagari.

"The authorities must ensure that the detainees are given immediate access to legal counsel and that their families are told where they are.

"The fact that several of the arrested men have been previously unlawfully detained, ill-treated and had police raids on their homes increases the concerns about their well-being."

Those detained are Maxwell Dlamini and Samkeliso (last name unknown), officials from the Swaziland National Union of Students (SNUS), Sifiso Mabuza, from the banned youth organization SWAYOCO, and Themba Mabuza, an organizer for the Swaziland United Democratic Front (SUDF).

The sweeping ban announced by the Swaziland government on 7 April affects planned activities by a range of organizations, including trade unions, and is a violation of the Swazi people's right to freedom of expression and in particular their right to peaceful assembly.

Activists have planned marches between 12-14 April in protest at political, social and economic conditions in the country.

Political and civil society organizations in Swaziland regard 12 April as the anniversary date of the 1973 King's Proclamation, which ushered in more than three decades of emergency rule.

In recent days the police and military have set up roadblocks throughout the country in an apparent attempt to disrupt plans for this week's protests and to arrest suspected organizers.

The home of at least one key trade union official was also raided and searched early on Monday.

"If tomorrow's march does take place, the Swaziland police must act with restraint and not use excessive force," Michelle Kagari said.