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Zimbabwe: Alarming clampdown on basic freedoms ahead of elections

Zimbabwean police are continuing to target and intimidate human rights defenders ahead of elections later this month according to a new report by Amnesty International.

Walk the Talk details how the police have conducted systematic raids on offices, arbitrarily arrested human rights defenders and seized equipment to intimidate and disrupt the work of organizations carrying out election related human rights work

“The clampdown on the work of human rights defenders is a worrying indicator that government agencies remain actively hostile to civil society,” said Noel Kututwa, Amnesty International’s Africa Deputy Programme Director.

“Zimbabwe’s security forces must respect and protect fundamental freedoms as the country prepares for a high stakes election at the end of July.”

At the end of 2012, amid speculation that Zimbabwe would hold elections as early as March 2013, Amnesty International documented increased targeting of human rights defenders and civil society organisations.

Since November 2012, at least five police raids of NGO offices have been conducted and dozens of human rights defenders unlawfully detained. Many are appearing in the courts on trumped-up charges that are widely considered to be politically motivated.

Though the prosecution of human rights defenders doesn’t necessarily result in convictions, they effectively paralyse the organizations through regular court appearances of the leaders; draining finances through high legal fees; and generating fear of long term imprisonment.

Amnesty International also documented clear partisan support by high ranking members of the country’s security services, who have openly pledged their allegiance to President Robert Mugabe’s ZANU-PF party.

“Such conduct is unacceptable and explicitly prohibited under Zimbabwe’s new constitution,” said Kututwa. “Given Zimbabwe’s history of state-sponsored violence it is guaranteed to generate fear among the population, particularly among communities that experienced serious violations in the 2008 election.”

In the run-up to the June 2008 second round of the presidential election at least 200 people were killed, while thousands were tortured and beaten in a wave of political violence that engulfed the country, often with the acquiescence or active involvement of, the police, army and intelligence services.

In order to resolve the political crisis that followed the election violence, the Southern Africa

Development Community (SADC) stepped in and later that year the Global Political Agreement (GPA) was signed.

Amnesty International calls on the SADC and the African Union as co-guarantors of the GPA to take all measures necessary to ensure non-repetition of state-sponsored violence during the 31 July harmonized elections.

This includes by sending election observers to meticulously document human rights violations, in particular those committed by government agencies, and by making a clear public statement that human rights violations will not be tolerated.

“The stakes are high in this election and the run up to it cannot simply be treated as business as usual, either by stakeholders in Zimbabwe or by the international community,” said Kututwa.

“Having just signed a new constitution into force in May, the Zimbabwe government must walk the talk and honour the commitments enshrined in it and protect the fundamental freedoms of its citizens.”