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Zimbabwe's acquittal of activist a small step against climate of intimidation

Today's acquittal of a key Zimbabwean human rights defender is encouraging, but the fact that it comes after three years of harassment is further confirmation that the police continue to abuse the law to hamper the work of human rights defenders, Amnesty International said.

Abel Chikomo, Director of the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, was brought to court in 2011 on charges of running an 'illegal' organization after it conducted a survey on transitional justice in Harare's Highfield suburb. The judge today found he "had no case to answer".

"Today's ruling confirms what Amnesty International has said all along – the Zimbabwean authorities never had a legal leg to stand on when they brought Abel Chikomo to court," said Aster van Kregten, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Africa.

"Bringing unfounded criminal charges against human rights defenders is one of the tools which have been consistently used to harass and intimidate Zimbabwe's civil society.

"The Zimbabwean authorities must not let such conduct by police tarnish the new government's pledges to improve their human rights record. They must act urgently to end the malicious use of spurious charges and trials against human rights defenders, and publicly denounce these practices."

Abel Chikomo has consistently denied the charges against him. His trial had many false starts and postponements before being revived in the run-up to elections in July of this year.