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Swaziland: Security forces commit human rights violations against human rights defenders and demonstrators

Amnesty International condemns the unlawful arrests, detentions and use of violence by the security forces to intimidate and disrupt peaceful protest activities this week in Swaziland.

In seeking to crush planned protest marches the security forces conducted mass arrests with no legal basis; held human rights defenders, political opposition leaders and foreign trade union officials in unlawful detention at police stations and in police vehicles; seized camera equipment, threatened and detained one journalist and assaulted another; and assaulted and threatened with further violence civil society activists from both Swaziland and abroad.

According to testimony received by Amnesty International, in one of the incidents a foreign trade union official was told by his police captors, when being deported from Swaziland, that “we dealt with your friend Siphho Jele” and threatened to “do the same” to him if he gave them any trouble. Siphho Jele died under suspicious circumstances in May 2010 within four days of being detained by the police.

Although the marches, organized by the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions and the Swaziland Democracy Campaign, were still able to go-ahead on 7 and 8 September, they were conducted under a heavy police and military presence. On the second day the marchers’ ability to hand over a petition to government officials calling for political and economic reforms and respect for human rights was disrupted by police blockades and violence against some participants.

Two trade union officials and a political opposition leader were assaulted and briefly detained by police. One of the trade unionists was hit in the head and body with fists, and open hands, kicked with booted feet and had his arms and legs severely twisted by police officers who dragged and pushed him into an armoured vehicle. The political activist had his jacket torn to pieces as some 30 police attempted to pull him out of a protective crowd. He was thrown into the armoured vehicle and, according to information received by Amnesty International, was verbally threatened by one of the police officers, who, 12 months previously, allegedly abducted and tortured him.

Amnesty International is concerned, furthermore, that the government, instead of holding the security forces accountable for their actions, appears to have condoned them and given the police additional licence by suggesting the use of torture to silence opposition voices. Prime Minister Sibusiso Dlamini, who is also the Minister of Police, is reported as stating at a press conference late on 8 September that torture involving beatings on the soles of the feet should be considered as a form of punishment against meddlesome foreigners and dissidents. Subsequent comments from the Office of the Prime Minister failed to constitute a repudiation of the use of torture.

Torture is prohibited under the Constitution of Swaziland and under international and regional human rights treaties. The Prime Minister, as the head of government, has a leading responsibility to ensure that the country fulfils its obligation to respect the absolute prohibition against torture.

Any public or private “suggestion” by a government official for the use of torture would constitute a violation of the United Nations Convention Against Torture, to which Swaziland is a party, and a crime under international law subject to universal jurisdiction. The harmful consequences of the Prime Minister’s reported comments are also increased by the fact that torture has been a persistent and unpunished pattern of police conduct for decades in Swaziland.

Amnesty International is calling on the government to issue an unequivocal statement denouncing the use of torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment under any circumstances, to commit to investigating and bringing to justice those found responsible for such violations and to cease the harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and peaceful demonstrators.

/ENDS

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