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Zimbabwe: Arrest and detention of four student leaders

Amnesty International today condemned yesterday's arrest and detention of four student leaders. They were arrested while addressing students at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare.

The leaders of the Zimbabwe National Students' Union (ZINASU) were addressing students outside the main library of the University of Zimbabwe when they and ten other students were rounded up and subsequently detained by police at Avondale police station. Though the ten were later released, ZINASU President Clever Bere, Kudakwashe Chakabva from the Harare Polytechnic, Archieford Mudzengi from the Zimbabwe School of Mines, and Brian Rugondo spent the night in custody.

This morning, the four student leaders were taken to the Law and Order section of Harare Central Police station where they remain. Currently, neither the detainees nor their lawyers have been advised of what the charges are against them.

"We are dismayed at the continued harassment and intimidation by police of activists and human rights defenders, despite the inauguration of an inclusive government in February this year. These students were arrested and detained purely as a result of attempting to exercise their right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly," said Erwin van der Borgh, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

"The student leaders should be released immediately and unconditionally. Their unlawful arrest demonstrates yet again the need to urgently reform the security sector in Zimbabwe in light of the numerous human rights violations that continue to be committed."

In their address to students at the University of Zimbabwe, the student leaders had spoken out against the way in which the university authorities have been preventing students who have not paid their fees from attending lectures and accessing the libraries.

Reports indicate that as many as three-quarters of all the students have not been able to pay their fees this semester, which range between USD 400 and USD 600 per semester. Lectures were due to start on 4 August.

Pending the release of the student leaders, Amnesty International urges the Zimbabwe Republic Police to ensure that they are treated in compliance with human rights standards governing the treatment of detainees. They should have access to their lawyers, their families, warm clothing and blankets, adequate food and any medical attention they may require.

Background

The Law and Order Section of the Zimbabwe Republic Police is responsible for many of the human rights violations committed by police officers against human rights defenders and political activists.

Amnesty International has documented numerous violations by the unit, including arbitrary arrest, unlawful detention, torture and other ill-treatment, and denial of detainees' access to lawyers, food and medical care while in police custody.