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Swaziland: Arrests of human rights activists condemned

Amnesty International calls for an end to the harassment of human rights defenders and political activists in Swaziland following the arrest today of nearly 50 people at a gathering of activists in the country's largest city, Manzini.

Most of those arrested were released without charge within hours however 16 people remain in custody. They include members of southern African and international trade union organizations. Amnesty International calls for their immediate release.

"The arbitrary arrest of these political activists, lawyers, trade unionists and journalists is nothing short of police harassment and intimidation," said Amnesty International's southern Africa researcher Mary Rayner who has just returned from the country.

The arrests occurred when police broke up a meeting organized by a broad coalition of groups campaigning for political change in Swaziland. Police also arrested at least one journalist covering the event and assaulted a human rights defender who had photographed the police actions.

The mass arrests occurred just before two days of planned pro-democracy demonstrations across the country.

Political activists, human rights defenders and trade unionists have been harassed, threatened, ill-treated and detained by the Swaziland police over the past year under draconian anti-terrorism legislation.