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Zimbabwe: Authorities must guarantee the safety of Jestina Mukoko

The Zimbabwean authorities must immediately disclose the whereabouts of human rights activist Jestina Mukoko, who was abducted from her home at dawn today by a group of armed plain-clothes men who identified themselves as policemen, Amnesty International said today.

"The abduction or arrest of Jestina Mukoko is part of an established pattern of harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders by Zimbabwean authorities in an attempt to discourage them from documenting and publicising the violations that are taking place," said Erwin van der Borgh, Amnesty International's Africa programme director.

Jestina Mukoko is the director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP), a local human rights organisation that is involved in monitoring and documenting human rights violations in Zimbabwe. Today, at around 5am local time, a group of at least 12 men stormed her home in Norton, South of the capital, Harare, and took her by force while still barefoot and dressed in pyjamas. An eyewitness told Amnesty International that the men then drove off in two cars, one of which did not have registration plates.

On Saturday 29 November, about six men, believed to be part of the same group, tried to enter her house during her absence after claiming to be workmates, according to the same eyewitness.

ZPP produces periodic reports on the human rights situation in the country, compiled through a network of community based human rights defenders.

"We hold the Zimbabwean authorities responsible for anything that may happen to Jestina Mukoko. She should be released immediately and while in detention the authorities should guarantee her safety and ensure that she has access to a lawyer and family, as well as food, warm clothes and medication," said Erwin van der Borgh.

The organization has also received information that several trade unionists, including the Secretary General of the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe Mr Raymond Majongwe and a journalist working for a South African broadcaster, have been arrested in Harare today. Amnesty International fears that the authorities may have launched a new campaign to silence human rights activists in the wake of today's protest action by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions.

Background

On Thursday 27 November three members of staff of the ZPP were arrested by police in Budiriro (a low income suburb of Harare) at a clinic offering treatment to cholera victims. Police initially threatened to

charge them under the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act and the Official Secrets Act. They were later charged with criminal nuisance and made to pay a fine of Z\$20 and released on Saturday 29 November.