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Zimbabwe: SADC's "Quiet Diplomacy" should not be silent acquiescence in human rights violations

Zimbabwe's trail of broken human rights promises should make members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) wary of taking at face value the commitments made at the organisation's 14 January Extraordinary Summit in Malawi, Amnesty International said today.

"'Quiet diplomacy' should not become silent acquiescence to continuing gross human rights violations in Zimbabwe," Amnesty International said. "President Robert Mugabe has made promises of human rights reforms to the Commonwealth, to the European Union (EU) and now to SADC – but there is no sign that the war of killings, torture and intimidation against the political opposition is slowing. Will SADC verify the promises they have received – and if so, how?"

SADC's final communiqué from the Summit listed human rights undertakings pledged by Zimbabwe, including full respect for human rights, commitments to freedom of expression and to independence of the judiciary, and agreement to accredit a range of national monitors and international observers.

Yet at the same time as President Robert Mugabe was in Malawi making these promises of improved human rights to the Southern African heads of state, his political party and its militia – the "war veterans" – attempted the murder of David Mpala, a member of Parliament of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and several opposition activists.

On Sunday 13 January 2002, some 20 members of the government-sponsored militia of "war veterans" and ZANU-PF supporters abducted Mr. David Mpala in broad daylight in the downtown of Lupane, in Matabeleland. His kidnappers slashed him with knives and dumped him outside of town. Police have reportedly arrested 11 suspects in connection with the incident.

One day earlier, more than 70 ruling party supporters wearing ZANU-PF t-shirts attacked an MDC office in Murambinda, hacking and stabbing seven suspected MDC supporters, two of whom had to be hospitalized with serious injuries.

Zimbabwe had also promised the European Union on Friday 11 January 2002, during talks under Article 96 of the Cotonou agreement, to allow observers into the country, and stated that they would shortly issue invitations.

Amnesty International notes that the EU has requested access for international election observers a full six weeks before the presidential election in Zimbabwe. That would mean that the EU team should be deployed into Zimbabwe by the end of next week. The human rights organization sincerely hopes that Zimbabwe will honour that undertaking, but urges the EU to monitor the deadline closely and require that the deployment begin immediately as part of the Zimbabweans' response to the EU.

"SADC, the EU and the Commonwealth should insist that observers, monitors, and human rights fact-finders must be deployed by next weekend at the latest, because now - and no later - is the time to verify the situation on the ground," the organization said.

Amnesty International also noted that when in September 2001, Zimbabwe had pledged to the Commonwealth in Abuja, Nigeria, to restore the rule of law in its country, those promises were soon broken. Indeed, Zimbabwe appeared to increase the state-sponsored violence after the Abuja agreement, including through the deployment of further military-trained militias under the guise of a Youth Service. President Mugabe seems sure that the Commonwealth will neither properly monitor nor take effective action with regard to these broken promises. Instead, the Commonwealth should insist that its Ministerial Action Group – blocked from visiting the country – be allowed in.

"The commitments made at the SADC Summit risk becoming another set of empty promises", Amnesty International said. "SADC should indicate how it will ensure there is independent monitoring of action taken by President Mugabe to meet his commitments made in Malawi. SADC should also demand that Zimbabwe invite the United Nations' Special Rapporteurs on human rights as independent investigators of allegations of political killings, torture, threats to journalists and subversion of the judiciary."

Although President Mugabe also pledged his commitment to freedom of expression and to allow freedom both domestic and international journalists to operate, Amnesty International questioned the adoption of new laws that will restrict freedom of expression. The passage last week of the Public Order and Security Act criminalizes non-violent political protest, and metes out prison sentences to those "insulting the president" or "disturbing the peace".

"The whole world has watched as one inter-governmental body after another have wrung promises of reform from Zimbabwe while at the same time the government condones Zimbabweans being killed, 'disappeared' and tortured," Amnesty International said. "Pressure to

stop state-sponsored violence in Zimbabwe, exerted by African and European governments does not undermine Zimbabwe's sovereignty, but reaffirms the standards that all states must uphold to be members of the international community of nations," Amnesty International said.

Background

An excerpt from the text of the SADC summit communiqué pertaining to Zimbabwe:

"Summit welcomed the following actions to be undertaken by Zimbabwe: full respect for human rights, including the right to freedom of opinion, association and peaceful assembly for all individuals; the commitment to investigate fully and impartially all cases of alleged political violence in 2001 and action to do so; a Zimbabwean Electoral Supervisory Commission which is adequately resourced and able to operate independently, the accreditation and registration of national independent monitors in good time for the elections; a timely invitation to, and accreditation of a wide range of international election observers; commitment to freedom of expression as guaranteed by the constitution of Zimbabwe; reaffirmation by Zimbabwe of its practice of allowing national and international journalists to cover important national events, including elections, on the basis of its laws and regulations; commitment by the government of Zimbabwe to the independence of the judiciary and to the rule of law; and the transfer by the government of Zimbabwe of occupiers of non-designated farms to legally acquired land".

The above list of actions to be taken by the Zimbabwe authorities was lifted verbatim from the communiqué of the EU's meeting with Zimbabwe of 11 January 2002. In its communiqué the EU noted that the Zimbabwean Authorities had expressed a willingness "to go some way towards meeting the EU's concerns with concrete actions" on these points, but stressed that "at this stage it is not satisfied that these concerns will be met."

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