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ZIMBABWE: Amnesty International appeals to President Robert Mugabe to protect human rights

On the anniversary of Zimbabwe's independence Amnesty International wrote to President Robert Mugabe urging him to ensure the protection of human rights in Zimbabwe.

The organization raised a number of concerns about the Zimbabwean government's failure to condemn clearly and publicly acts of violence allegedly perpetrated by government supporters which are having a drastic impact on Zimbabweans' fundamental rights to freedom of association and assembly. The organization expressed particular concern about the failure of the police to enforce court rulings and to fulfill their duties by protecting all Zimbabweans, regardless of race or political affiliation.

Amnesty International also highlighted its concerns about arbitrary arrests and intimidation of journalists and other threats to freedom of expression. The organization expressed fears that failure to respect rulings by the courts undermines the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. The pattern of events is cumulatively undermining the possibility of free and fair elections this year.

In its letter, Amnesty International called on President Mugabe to:

clearly condemn the human rights abuses that have taken place so far;

publicly state that all parties should be free to hold rallies without intimidation from any other party's supporters and especially call on ZANU-PF supporters to refrain from activities which would inhibit freedom of assembly and association, and to refrain from committing further human rights abuses in the build-up to the elections;

ensure that the police act impartially and fully protect the rights of all persons to freely participate in non-violent political assembly and association;

state clearly that the media in Zimbabwe should be free to express its opinions and gather information without intimidation; and

ensure that the police obey court orders in the cases of farm occupations and undertake their responsibilities in an impartial manner and in accordance with the law.

Background:

Amnesty International issued its appeal in the context of increasing reports of incidents of political violence. In most of these incidents there are substantial allegations of involvement of supporters of ZANU-PF of which President Mugabe is the First Secretary. Among the incidents referred to in the letter to President Mugabe were the following:

On 1 April a peaceful march in Harare was broken up by some 200 men, allegedly so-called war veterans and supporters of ZANU-PF, who, armed with sticks, knobkerries, stones and other weapons attacked the unarmed marchers. Police officers in riot gear, who were ostensibly on the scene to maintain order, failed to take responsible steps to prevent attacks or

to disarm and arrest the attackers. At least 15 marchers were reported injured, including some who needed hospital treatment. No attackers were arrested.

Supporters of ZANU-PF allegedly broke up meetings held by opposition parties, by engaging in fights with participants or generally disrupting the meetings.

On 1 April police detained Media Monitoring Project's Edwina Spicer in Harare, while she was carrying out her work as a reporter.

On 6 April the *Daily News* reported that two of their reporters were unlawfully held by squatters at a farm in Mvurwi.

In its letter Amnesty International acknowledged that land reform is a sensitive and difficult issue but noted with concern the police failure to act upon orders of the court when, on two occasions, the Zimbabwean courts have ruled that under the country's present law the occupation of commercial farms by landless people is illegal, and that the squatters should leave.

Amnesty International is now receiving reports on an almost daily basis concerning violence, intimidation and threats against farmers and farm workers, in the context of the ongoing takeover of commercial farms by landless people led by war veterans. In these incidents the police are failing to intervene to provide protection to unarmed and innocent residents.

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