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Zimbabwe: Politically motivated violence deliberately targeting opposition political activists and farming communities in rural areas

The two latest deaths of opposition party members in Zimbabwe only confirm the pattern which shows that the on-going violence in Zimbabwe is largely targeted at real or perceived opponents of the government, Amnesty International said today.

Opposition activists and supporters, real or perceived, are being intimidated and attacked, and at least 13 have been killed, in rural areas by so-called "war veterans" and other supporters of the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF).

There is also evidence that some of the farms violently occupied by so-called "war veterans" belong to farmers who are aligned to the opposition or provided transport for farm workers to vote in the referendum, and in some cases actively campaigned for a "No" vote. Farm workers have been subjected to attacks and threats by those forcibly occupying the farms.

"Far from condemning these abuses -- which are continuing with the apparent complicity or acquiescence of the authorities -- President Mugabe has repeatedly made statements supporting those responsible," Maina Kiai, Director of the Africa Program, said.

In February 2000 President Mugabe lost a referendum on a proposed new constitution. This major defeat for his government was followed shortly afterwards by an upsurge of political conflict. Supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF, including so-called "war veterans" began harassing and attacking opposition activists and occupying commercial farms; the occupations were peaceful at first, but have become increasingly violent.

"The atmosphere of fear and intimidation in the countryside is hampering freedom of assembly and association in the rural areas, particularly for those who do not support ZANU-PF, in the run-up to parliamentary elections, which must be held by August this year," Amnesty International said.

Although opposition party supporters have also reportedly been implicated in the violence, most eyewitness reports from victims, onlookers and journalists identify the perpetrators of violence as being ZANU-PF members or supporters. There are also some news reports of violent incidents between supporters of ZANU-PF and those of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), where, in some instances, supporters of both parties have been arrested.

The following cases exemplify the violent targeting of specific sectors of society, in particular:

opposition members and supporters: on 15 April 2000, armed men in a vehicle reportedly bearing ZANU-PF markings stopped a car full of MDC members and supporters, who had been preparing for a political rally, south-east of the capital, Harare. They smashed the car windows and threw in a firebomb, killing Tichaona Chiminya, an MDC driver. One of the passengers, Talent Mabika, died later in hospital, and five others were injured. Police in the area, Murambinda Growth Point, reportedly did not intervene. One suspect has reportedly since been arrested.

journalists: on the weekend of 22 to 23 April the building housing the offices of The Daily News in Harare was bombed. The editor of the newspaper had received a threatening letter previous to the attack.

farming communities: on 15 April farmer David Stevens, who had been active on behalf of the MDC and had allowed MDC rallies on his farm, near Macheke, was reportedly abducted from his farm and shot dead by “war veterans”. Another farmer, John Osborne, was abducted by war veterans from the police station where he had gone to report David Stevens’s abduction.

farm workers: on 3 April 20 alleged ZANU-PF supporters attacked game warden Farai Sandikonda, breaking his arm and cutting his head badly, as he tried to protect his farm manager’s house, near Mvurwi, north of Harare. About a week later, ZANU-PF youth league members publicly stripped and assaulted six workers, four men and two women, at another farm north of Harare, in the Mt Darwin area. They were forced to dance and sing ZANU-PF songs while being beaten, and needed hospital treatment. Their attackers threatened to return and assault their children if they went to the police.

The role of the police

Senior police officers have refused to comply with High Court rulings of 17 March and 13 April that these so-called "war-veterans" and "squatters" should leave the occupied farms, and there are reports that police have failed to intervene to prevent abuses or apprehend culprits at the scene. The attitude of the authorities is encouraging perpetrators to believe they can commit human rights abuses with impunity.

Amnesty International acknowledges the difficult role that the police are required to play in this situation. A police officer was shot dead by squatters on 4 April, reportedly at a farm near Marondera where he had gone to investigate the 3 April assault on farmer and MDC supporter Iain Kay. However, the government needs to ensure that the police have sufficient reinforcements to carry out their duties.

“We once again urge President Robert Mugabe to condemn these violations and take adequate measures to stop the deterioration of human rights in Zimbabwe,” Amnesty International said, reiterating the call made in the recent open letter sent last week to President Mugabe.

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