

URGENT ACTION

ACTIVISTS AT RISK IN SWAZI POLICE CRACKDOWN

Political activists, human rights defenders and trade unionists in Swaziland are at risk of harassment, ill-treatment and arrest, as the authorities use draconian counter-terror legislation to investigate a spate of government-targeted petrol bombings.

Amnesty International has been in contact with more than a dozen activists in Swaziland who have been harassed, threatened, ill-treated or detained by the Swaziland police since June 2010, under the 2008 Suppression of Terrorism Act (STA). Activists have had homes and offices searched, been searched themselves at roadblocks; they have had documents and other materials seized and have been under intense surveillance. Amnesty International is not naming the activists for fear of increasing their risk.

Some of the house searches of individuals, including those accused of being members of, or sympathetic to, banned political organizations, have been conducted without search warrants and in the early morning hours by armed police. Some were denied the right to make calls during the prolonged search operations. Some were later taken to police stations for interrogation about their political activities. Testimony and other information received by Amnesty International indicate that several political activists have been subjected to torture and other forms of ill-treatment during interrogation. In one case, the victim was allegedly beaten with batons and subjected to suffocation torture. He was released without charge, but remains at risk of further ill-treatment.

Two political activists have also told Amnesty International that armed police recently came to their homes searching for them. Neither were present when the police arrived and do not know when the police may return. Both men have been unlawfully detained and allegedly tortured by the police in the past. Amnesty International is concerned that these men, and several others, may be at risk of ill-treatment again if they are arrested and interrogated by the police in the coming weeks.

High profile human rights defenders and trade unionists have also had their homes searched by armed police, usually under warrants authorizing them to search for evidence of terrorist activities.

PLEASE WRITE IMMEDIATELY in English or your own language:

- Appeal to the government to ensure that official investigations into the recent spate of bombings in Swaziland are conducted in full compliance with the country's obligations under international human rights law and in particular regarding the absolute prohibition against torture;
- Express your concern that police, during investigations into the bombing incidents, have undertaken prolonged searches at the homes of a large number of alleged members of political organizations and some civil society activists, sometimes without warrants and followed by interrogations involving alleged threats, ill-treatment and torture in several cases at police stations;
- Note that while all governments have a clear duty to protect their population from deliberate violent attack, all governments, including Swaziland's, must adhere to their obligations under international human rights law in responding to incidents or threats of violent attacks.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 31 JULY 2010:

Prime Minister

Dr. Barnabas Sibusiso Dlamini

P O Box 395,

Mbabane,

Swaziland,

Fax: +268 404 3943

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Commissioner of Police

Mr Isaac Magagula

The Royal Swaziland Police Service,

P.O. Box 49,

Mbabane H100

Swaziland

Fax: +268 404 4545

Salutation: Dear Commissioner

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In August 2008, the Suppression of Terrorism Act was signed into law in Swaziland. The implementation of the law has led to arbitrary arrests, ill-treatment of detainees and the charging of political activists under provisions of law that are vague, sweeping and fail to meet international standards. The law has had an intimidating and silencing effect on political activists calling for democratic reforms and human rights defenders campaigning to address the country's dire humanitarian situation. In November 2008, the government declared four political organizations, including the longstanding political organizations People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO) and the Swaziland Youth Congress (SWAYOCO) to be terrorist "entities" under the provisions of the law.

Many of the circumstances regarding the recent spate of petrol bombings remain unclear. However, it appears that they have been largely targeted against government institutions. There are no reports of loss of life or injury but some damage to property has been caused. In June, two men were arrested and charged under the Suppression of Terrorism Act in connection with the incidents.

Among those directly affected by the current wave of repression are officials and members of trade unions, human rights defenders working with non-governmental organizations, leaders of new political coalitions including the Swaziland United Democratic Front and Swaziland Democracy Campaign, and members or suspected members of PUDEMO and SWAYOCO. Amnesty International has confirmed information on incidents involving more than a dozen individuals but many other incidents have been reported on which it is seeking confirmation. Some of the political activists have gone into hiding out of fear of detention and ill-treatment.

In late 2005 –early 2006, following a similar spate of petrol bombing in Swaziland, 16 individuals were arrested and charged with treason and other offences. They were released on bail in March 2006 and have yet to be brought to trial. Allegations of suffocation torture, beatings and other ill-treatment emerged at magistrates court hearings. The High Court, when granting bail, ordered the government to investigate these allegations. While the Prime Minister established a commission of inquiry in October 2006, the results have never been made public.

The searches and interrogations of high profile human rights defenders and trade unionists appear deliberately intended to intimidate and undermine their lawful organizing and advocacy work and are evidence of the indiscriminate use and effect of the STA.

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