

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Zimbabwe: Ten dead following police misuse of tear gas**

Amnesty International is calling for a full and independent inquiry into the deaths of at least ten people, since 2 September 2004, at Porta Farm, an informal settlement on the outskirts of Harare.

On 2 September, riot police, "war veterans" and members of the youth "militia" reportedly went to Porta Farm to forcibly evict some 10,000 people, many of whom have been living there since 1991. The police were acting in defiance of a court order prohibiting the eviction. According to eye-witness testimony, the police fired tear gas directly into the homes of the Porta Farm residents.

One resident of Porta Farm, a man who had been ill with tuberculosis, is reported to have died on 2 September, shortly after being exposed to the tear gas. A young child died the following day. By Sunday 19 September eight more Porta Farm residents had died. Residents claim that all those who died, several of whom were reported to have pre-existing illnesses, had been exposed to the tear gas. Amongst the dead are a mother and her five-month old son, who were in their home when police fired tear gas into the building.

Hundreds of residents have complained of chest and stomach pains, nose bleeding and other ill-effects since the tear gas incident. Doctors who examined some of the Porta Farm residents, following the events of 2 September, believe that those most seriously affected by the tear gas were particularly vulnerable due to pre-existing illnesses such as tuberculosis.

Amnesty International is appalled by the excessive use of force by the Zimbabwe Republic Police, and deeply concerned by the deaths at Porta Farm. "Firing tear gas into a confined space is completely contrary to international human rights standards on the use of force by law enforcement officials because of the danger posed to those exposed," the organization said.

Amnesty International is also concerned by the attempt to forcibly evict the residents of Porta Farm. Forced evictions - a term used internationally to describe evictions carried out without due process - violate human rights. They violate Zimbabwe's obligations under international human rights treaties to which it is a party. Forced evictions undermine the right to adequate housing and subject people to arbitrary or unlawful interference with their privacy, family or home.

"The Government of Zimbabwe has an obligation to provide access to adequate housing for all people within its jurisdiction. Any resettlement of the residents of Porta Farm must ensure that their civil, political, social and economic rights are upheld," Amnesty International said.

"The authorities must ensure that all those affected by the police use of tear gas are

properly examined and provided with any medical care they may need," the organization added.

## **Background**

In 1991 thousands of people living in informal settlements around Harare were moved, by the government, to Porta Farm, as a temporary measure in anticipation of being permanently resettled. More than a decade later the majority remain at Porta Farm. In July 2004 the Porta Farm residents were allegedly told they would be relocated to other farms. However, the residents were subsequently threatened with death by "war veterans" if they moved to the proposed locations. On 31 August 2004 they obtained a court order staying their eviction from Porta Farm for 10 days, while the matter was investigated further.

Tear gas can be lethal if used in confined spaces. It can also cause people to panic and stampede, which is often where the most serious injuries and fatalities occur. Amnesty International has documented misuse of tear gas by police in Zimbabwe for several years, including incidents at the University of Zimbabwe in 1995 and 2001.

Amnesty International has examined some of the tear gas canisters used by the police on 2 September at Porta Farm to determine the suppliers. Many of the canisters carried the initials "PW", while some were marked "ZW". Canisters with these initials were also fired into university student residences by the Zimbabwe Republic Police in November 2001.

## **Public Document**

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