

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index AFR 46/001/2002 - News Service Nr. 6
Embargoed for : 14/01/2002 10:00 GMT

Zimbabwe: SADC must take a firm stance now to avert civil strife
Amnesty International is urging heads of state of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) to take a firm stance on the escalating human rights crisis in Zimbabwe during their meeting in Blantyre, Malawi, on 14 January 2002.

"The time has come for SADC to send a strong and consistent message that the situation in Zimbabwe has grown worse, that the Zimbabwean authorities should not allow human rights to be violated with impunity, and that SADC will monitor developments more closely on the ground through its own monitors with the aim of promoting the respect of fundamental human rights necessary for a free and fair election," Amnesty International said.

The organization believes, as former South Africa President Nelson Mandela stated to the assembled at the 1997 SADC Summit also in Blantyre, that: "The right of citizens to participate unhindered in political activities in the country of their birthright is a non-negotiable basic principle to which we all subscribe... We collectively cannot remain silent when political or civil movements are harassed and suppressed through harsh state action."

"The deteriorating human rights situation in Zimbabwe places in real jeopardy the possibility of free and fair elections taking place on 9 to 10 March 2002, and raises the spectre of such violent repression of political opposition degenerating into civil war and the possibility of state-sponsored militias undermining any attempt to reassert the rule

of law," Amnesty International said in a memorandum to the assembled leaders.

In just the past few weeks, the organization has received reports of up to 10 people killed in violent repression by state-sponsored militias, including:

On 20 December, **Milton Chambati**, 45, was stabbed to death and his head was hacked off by a group of about 50 suspected members of the Zanu PF Youth Brigade who had besieged Magunje town in northwest Zimbabwe, and started beating up opposition party members. Police have not arrested anyone in connection with the killing, and failed or refused to investigate the matter.

On 21 December, ZANU-PF youth in Karoi stabbed to death **Titus Nheya**, 56, a veteran politician and trade unionist who had contested the Zvimba South parliamentary seat for the opposition. The group was reportedly led by a well known war veteran. When the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) reported the incident to the police, the war veteran was arrested but later released without charge. The case appeared to have been closed.

Opposition political member **Rambisai Nyika** was killed December 24 in Gokwe, in western Zimbabwe, allegedly by militant supporters of ZANU-PF. To Amnesty International's knowledge, no investigation into the killings has been carried out.

Opposition activist **Laban Chiweta**, died in hospital on 26 December from burns and head injuries. National Youth Service members allegedly attacked him in the town of Trojan Mine near Bindura on 6 December. Opposition officials said the attack on Chiweta and others took place in the presence of police officers who neither intervened nor arrested the assailants.

Trymore Midzi, 24, died on 31 December at the Avenues Clinic in Harare after allegedly being stabbed on 29 December in Bindura by ZANU-PF supporters and young trainees from the Border Gezi Youth Training Centre. Police have reportedly arrested suspects.

Amnesty International's main recommendation to the gathering of the Southern African heads of state is simple: "The SADC Presidents should deploy immediately a credible presence of human rights monitors -- in addition to election monitors from the SADC Parliamentary Forum to observe the presidential balloting in March 2002 -- to avert further political killings, "disappearances", torture and mass displacement of rural people," Amnesty International said.

The organization is concerned about the conflicting messages about its stance on the Zimbabwe crisis since September. To correct any inconsistency in its message to Zimbabwe, Amnesty International urges the SADC Heads of State to send a strong, clear message at the 13 to 15 January 2002 Summit that state-sponsored violence in Zimbabwe cannot be tolerated by the international community. Inter-governmental organizations, such as the Commonwealth and the European Union, should be approached to provide positive support for specific measures to create a monitoring mechanism in Zimbabwe through SADC, and its Organ on Politics, Defence and Security.

Background

Amnesty International welcomed the initiative by SADC when it held an extraordinary two-day summit on 17 and 18 September 2001 in Harare to help facilitate dialogue to ease the Zimbabwean political crisis.

The Summit's opening statement, and the subsequent action by the regional heads of state, constituted a positive initiative to reverse the drift towards the indiscriminate political assaults that has emerged there.

Yet the final communique of the SADC ministerial task force visiting Zimbabwe from 10 to 12 December 2001 stated that SADC "welcomed the improved atmosphere of calm and stability" and expressed their gratification to learn that "violence on the farms had reduced significantly, and that the few reported incidents were being dealt with under the criminal justice system, in accordance with the rule of law, irrespective of the political affiliation of the alleged perpetrators". More recently, the chairperson of that SADC ministerial task force, Malawi's foreign minister Lilian Patel, reportedly stated on 3 January 2002, that the upcoming Summit will discuss ways to raise funds for the inter-Congolese dialogue and not the Zimbabwe crisis, which she described as an "internal problem".

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>