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Zimbabwe: Appeal to Commonwealth leaders on Commonwealth Day.

On the occasion of Commonwealth Day on 10 March, Amnesty International is calling on the Commonwealth to take rigorous action in response to escalating state repression of human rights defenders, opposition officials and the independent media in Zimbabwe.

Supporters and officials of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the independent media, church leaders and human rights defenders continue to be subjected to harassment, arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment by the Zimbabwean authorities," Amnesty International said.

Since the start of 2003, politically motivated violence has intensified largely linked to state efforts to silence dissent prior to scheduled World Cup cricket matches and in the run up to parliamentary by-elections in Kuwadzana and Highfield, two high density suburbs outside of Harare. As parliamentary by-elections scheduled to take place on 29-30 March approach, MDC members of parliament, opposition officials and supporters are being subjected to intimidation, arbitrary arrest and torture by government authorities and militia.

On 2 March, up to 72 MDC supporters were arrested on their way back from a rally addressed by MDC president Morgan Tsvangirai, in Harare. They were taken to several police stations where they were assaulted and beaten by police before they were later released.

On the same day, Nelson Chamisa, the MDC candidate for Kuwadzana, was arrested by the police along with 10 MDC supporters, while distributing pamphlets ahead of the parliamentary by-elections in Kuwadzana. All were released on the same day but were prevented by police from carrying out door-to-door canvassing.

On 28 February, 23 church leaders were arrested by the police when they tried to deliver a petition to the police calling for an end to police violations of human rights. The church leaders were detained for several hours and then released without charge.

"The Commonwealth should clearly signal to the Government of Zimbabwe that these acts are in clear violation of the human rights principles enshrined in the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration," the organization said.

Amnesty International urges Commonwealth governments to use all possible influence to encourage the Zimbabwe authorities to bring an immediate end to human rights violations perpetrated by the government. The disparity between the principles enshrined in the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Declaration, and the reality of human rights violations in Zimbabwe creates an urgent need for renewed

action by the Commonwealth.

"The Commonwealth should send a strong and clear message that the worsening situation in Zimbabwe can not be ignored and that the Zimbabwean authorities should not allow human rights to be violated with impunity. The Commonwealth should take all necessary steps to ensure that the Zimbabwean authorities live up to their responsibilities under the Harare Commonwealth Declaration," Amnesty International said.

"On a day when the 54 member countries of the Commonwealth celebrate their links with one another, the citizens of Zimbabwe should not stand alone in the face of escalating state repression and violence," the organization concluded.

Background

Commonwealth Day is an annual event during which all the fifty-four member countries of the Commonwealth celebrate their links with one another. The day is celebrated around the world on the second Monday in March.

Public Document

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