

AI INDEX: AFR 46/06/96  
11 NOVEMBER 1996

ZIMBABWE: RIGHT TO PEACEFULLY ASSEMBLE FOR PROTEST MARCH UNDER  
ATTACK

Today's arrest of trade unionists gathering to peacefully demonstrate in support of striking junior doctors and nurses shows the Zimbabwean Government's inability to tolerate dissenting voices, Amnesty International said today.

"Human rights do not appear to be faring well in Zimbabwe, when nurses, students and concerned citizens are tear gassed and hit with batons simply for protesting against government policy," the organization said as it called for the immediate release of all those detained.

"The message sent by the Zimbabwean Government seems to be clear: remain silent or risk arrest."

More than 50 Zimbabwean riot police this morning fired teargas and used batons in downtown Harare to break up a planned protest march by trade unions, churches and human rights groups. Earlier, the Zimbabwean Government issued an order banning public demonstrations in support of thousands of nurses and junior doctors who went on strike.

Police took five organisers of the march into custody, including two union leaders, but it was not clear on what grounds they were arrested. When the people dispersed, the police allegedly began beating some of the 200 people trying to leave the scene. Several people were reportedly injured in the melée.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned about the arrests of Morgan Tsvangirai and Isaac Matongo, the secretary-general and vice president respectively of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), as well as the earlier arrest of the head of the Zimbabwe Teachers Union. The organization believes that all those arrested are prisoners of conscience and should be immediately and unconditionally released.

Amnesty International confirmed several instances of brutal assaults on peaceful protestors, including instances of police assault and tear-gassing of University of Zimbabwe students. Last week, nurses and junior doctors were sacked for striking.

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, of which Zimbabwe is a signatory, guarantee the right to freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom to assemble in public. These rights are also enshrined in the Zimbabwe constitution, including its declaration of rights.

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