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Zimbabwe: Mass arrests signal new and dangerous phase of repression

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Amnesty International is deeply concerned by the increasing scale of arbitrary detentions and for the safety of several hundred people including officials and supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) taken into custody in Zimbabwe since 18 March 2003. Although some of those arrested have been released, many remain in detention, whilst the whereabouts of others remain unknown. At least one person, Steven Toner, a farmworker in Manicaland province has been killed, allegedly as a result of being beaten by state agents.

"What we are witnessing is much more than the government's usual tactic of raising the level of violence in the run-up to elections. This is an explosive situation where there seem to be no limits to how far the government will go to suppress opposition and maintain its hold on power", Amnesty International said.

This latest wave of violence seems a reaction to an MDC-organised stay-away on 18-19 March and is an attempt by the government and its supporters to intimidate supporters of the MDC and other government critics prior to two by-elections due on 29-30 March.

In one incident, on 18 March, a group of soldiers and state agents beat and tortured three workers on the farm of Roy Bennet, MDC MP for Chimanimani. The three men were forced to lie on their stomachs on the ground and beaten with batons, sjamboks (whips) and pieces of wire. Their fingers and toes were also broken. As a result of the beatings and torture, one of the workers Steve Toner died. The three men were accused of being MDC supporters and of burning a bus. On 20 March, a convoy of three trucks carrying up to 60 soldiers of the Zimbabwe National Army came back to the farm and severely assaulted up to 70 people.

On 19 March up to 60 MDC activists were arrested in Harare including: Silas Mangono, MDC MP for Masvingo Central, Giles Mutsekewa, MDC MP for Mutare North and Austin Mupandawana, MDC MP for Kadoma Central. Silas Mangono was released on 20 March but Giles Mutsekewa, Austin Mupandawana and other MDC activists remain in police custody.

On 18 March, a photographer for the Daily News newspaper, Philimon Bulawayo was

arrested by police while covering a stay-away coordinated by the MDC in Budiriro, Harare. Gugulethu Moyo a lawyer and Corporate Affairs Director for Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe was also arrested when she tried to secure his release from Glen View police station. At the station, the two were reportedly severely beaten by the wife of an army commander and a male colleague, while the police stood by and watched. On 19 March, they were moved to Harare Police Station. Although they had been severely beaten, they were not allowed access to medical treatment and were released without charge on 20 March.

"The alarming escalation in political violence is a clear indication that the Zimbabwe authorities are determined to suppress dissent by whatever means necessary, regardless of the terrible consequences. We look upon the next ten days with fear: the expectation is of further violent reaction to organised protests by the MDC and civil society" the organization said.

Amnesty International is calling on the Zimbabwe authorities to put an immediate end to the human rights violations and politically motivated violence occurring in the country, to bring to justice those involved in these abuses and ensure that the police conduct their duties with complete impartiality.

Background

In the last month the government has suffered bad publicity over the hosting of cricket world cup matches and then had its suspension from the Commonwealth extended. By-elections are scheduled in Kuwadzana and Highfield, suburbs of the capital Harare, for 29-30 March. Elections have for the past three years been a focus of suppression of opposition, even more so as the government seems determined to gain seats in the urban areas which have been a stronghold of the MDC. On 18-19 March the MDC coordinated a stay-away in the two main cities of Harare and Bulawayo which seems to have been observed by the vast majority of workers and businesses. The MDC has since given the government a deadline of 31 March to meet certain demands or face 'an escalation of protests'.

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