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Zimbabwe: Post-election responsibilities of the Commonwealth

Amnesty International is calling on the assembled Commonwealth leaders in Coolumb, Australia to engage constructively with the Zimbabwean authorities about the future of human rights in that country after the presidential election scheduled for 9 - 10 March 2002.

In a five-page appeal to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) opening on 2 March 2002, the organization described the gathering as "a unique chance for the international community to begin the process of discussing with the Zimbabwean authorities the longer term implications of the government's undermining of the independence of the police, the army, the prison services, and the judicial system". If the newly elected government demonstrates the political will to rebuild respect for human rights, Commonwealth states should aid human rights reforms.

Through a "win at all costs" campaign, the Zimbabwean authorities have subverted the impartiality and professionalism of the criminal justice system, including the laws, the courts, the police and the prisons, and turned them into tools for political repression. The police, for example, far from investigating the state-sponsored violence in an impartial and independent manner, have blocked those members of the ruling party and its militias suspected of gross human rights violations from being brought to justice.

In its December 2001 visit to Zimbabwe, Amnesty International delegates interviewed-- under guarantees of anonymity-- senior ZANU-PF officials, senior police officials and senior army officers.

They confirmed that the police, army and the party were deliberately promoting killings, torture and forcible displacement in a planned, state-coordinated program of widespread human rights violations. Dozens of interviews with victims confirmed what Zimbabwean non-governmental organizations have been documenting extensively for almost two years. The present government is trying to retain power in this month's presidential election at the cost of enormous human suffering.

The arbitrary detentions in February of two Zimbabwean members of parliament and 16 other opposition officials illustrate the extent to which the court system has been manipulated to defer to the wishes of President Mugabe, who on at least three occasions denounced the opposition as "terrorists" and named the defendants as guilty of the killing of an official of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans' Association. Amnesty International believes all 18 of those being prosecuted on politically motivated charges will be prisoners of conscience if convicted and imprisoned, and appeals to the Zimbabwean authorities to drop the charges against the defendants because they appear to be based solely on evidence extracted by torture.

This week's arrest of Morgan Tsvangirai, the presidential candidate for the Movement for Multiparty Democracy, also appears to be politically motivated in its timing. While Amnesty International has not had the opportunity to examine the video evidence used to justify his arrest, the judicial system in Zimbabwe remains compromised by political manipulation. There is no effective, impartial mechanism in Zimbabwe for evaluating properly the allegations that Morgan Tsvangirai was involved in an attempt to hire individuals to assassinate the President. Amnesty International therefore expresses doubts as to the fairness of his arrest and further prosecution.

Regardless of which political candidate wins the election in less than 10 days' time, Amnesty International remains concerned that further human rights violations will be carried out by the state or its militia. We therefore urge the Commonwealth leaders gathered at the CHOQM to clearly communicate to President Robert Mugabe, and other senior Zimbabwean government officials, that the human rights violations that are taking place on a daily basis must be ended immediately.

If they demonstrate the political will to remedy the cycle of impunity, assistance could be offered to the Zimbabwean authorities to help bring to justice those who have so far avoided being prosecuted; compensate the victims of those violations fairly; rebuild an impartial and independent police and prisons service; repeal draconian legislation that has been put in place recently to repress freedom of expression, assembly and association; and entrench in the law the protection of basic human rights.

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