

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 46/020/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 104
2 May 2003

Embargo Date: 2 May 2003 08:00 GMT

Zimbabwe: Government uses repressive legislation to put rights under siege

The Government of Zimbabwe is using provisions of national legislation to silence dissent, perpetrate human rights violations and place the basic rights of Zimbabweans under siege, Amnesty International said in a report published to mark World Press Freedom Day on 3 May.

"The Zimbabwean authorities, particularly the police, are using repressive legislation to systematically harass, arrest and torture with impunity those perceived to be supporting the political opposition and exposing human rights violations. Officials and supporters of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the independent media and civil society organizations in particular have been singled out for attack", the organization said.

The report, entitled *Zimbabwe: Rights under siege*, examines how the government has introduced and selectively used legislation as a vehicle for committing widespread human rights violations and thus denying its opponents and critics their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Provisions of the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO) Act are examples of recently enacted legislation which contravene international human rights standards. The Government of Zimbabwe has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), both of which protect the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

"The Government of Zimbabwe should immediately cease all intimidation, arbitrary arrests and torture of political opponents, independent media and human rights activists," Amnesty International urged.

The Zimbabwean authorities should urgently repeal or amend all legislation which violates the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly and bring national legislation in line with the ICCPR, the African Charter and other international human rights standards.

The Zimbabwean authorities should also immediately end the political misuse of the police and ensure that police officers abide by the highest standards of professionalism and respect for human rights.

"In light of escalating state repression of fundamental human rights, Amnesty International is urging

the international community, particularly Southern African governments, to redouble their efforts to publicly signal to the Zimbabwean authorities that intimidation, arbitrary arrests and torture of government critics is unacceptable" Amnesty International concluded.

Background

Following a national stay-away organized by the MDC on 18 and 19 March, the police used various provisions of POSA to intimidate and unlawfully arrest hundreds of opposition supporters and human rights activists. Many were beaten and tortured while in police custody. Up 130 of them, including three members of parliament, were arrested and charged under Section 6 of POSA for allegedly inciting violence and acts of terrorism. On 31 March 2003 Gibson Sibanda, Vice-President of the MDC, was arrested after the authorities accused him of trying to overthrow the government by inciting people to join the stay-away. He was charged under Section 5 of POSA which carries a maximum penalty of 20 years, and released on bail on 7 April 2003. Another mass national stay-away was organized by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) on 23-25 April 2003 in protest against increases in the price of fuel. In response, the police are reported to have detained at least 20 ZCTU officials and members in Bulawayo, Gweru, Kwekwe and Chiredzi in connection with organizing the stay-away.

* **The Zimbabwe action web page is available at:**
<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/zwe-020503-action-eng>

* **This report is available at:** <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf460122003>

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