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Zimbabwe: Government steps up harassment of human rights defenders

Amnesty International condemns efforts by the Zimbabwean government to silence human rights defenders. Recent statements by government ministers signal intensified scrutiny and intimidation of NGOs who have spoken out about the deteriorating human rights situation in Zimbabwe.

"Human rights organizations who expose human rights violations and are perceived to be critical of government policy are coming under increasing attack," Amnesty International said today.

Amnesty International calls upon the Zimbabwean government to respect the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and to immediately end its intimidation and harassment of human rights organizations and other human rights defenders.

"The authorities must enable human rights defenders to work without fear of intimidation or arrest. The Zimbabwean authorities and the international community should ensure that impartial and independent public investigations are carried out into human rights violations and that those responsible are brought to justice" said Amnesty International.

On 13 November, the government published a list of NGOs which allegedly threaten national peace and security. On the same day, Patrick Chinamasa, the Minister of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs made statements in parliament accusing Amani Trust, a leading Zimbabwean human rights and service organization which appears on the list, as well as other organizations, of destabilizing the country. The Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, July Moyo reportedly told parliament that organizations such as Amani Trust which are not registered under the Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO) Act would be forced to close their offices or face arrests.

The government also reportedly discredited the political violence reports produced by the Amani Trust. The research findings of Amani Trust on human rights violations in Zimbabwe are consistent with Amnesty International's own investigations and those of other international humanitarian and human rights organizations. Amnesty International believes that these allegations are part of government efforts to discredit and undermine the work and reputation of Amani Trust. Amani Trust appears to have been specifically targeted by the government because of its meticulous documentation of human rights abuses.

"The government's recent enforcement of the PVO Act is part of an overall campaign to shut down organizations and silence independent media which investigate and publicize human rights violations in Zimbabwe. Some of these organizations, such as Amani Trust, provide vital medical and psychological services to hundreds of victims of political violence and torture. These developments, in addition to on-going state intimidation and harassment of independent journalists, lawyers and human rights NGOs, has effectively created a hostile work environment for human rights defenders," Amnesty International said.

Background

In September, the government issued a public notice advising NGOs to register with the government as per Section 6 of the Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO) Act. The notice warned that NGOs which failed to register risked prosecution. Although the PVO Act was enacted in 1997, it has not been fully enforced. There are also concerns that new legislation may be introduced which will further curtail the activities of NGOs.

In August, Dr. Frances Lovemore, Medical Director of Amani Trust, was arrested and charged with "publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the state". The charge stemmed from press reports which referred to Amani Trust's work with victims of torture and politically motivated rape in Zimbabwe. The offices of Amani Trust were raided and searched by police. Dr. Lovemore was released the day after her arrest and all charges against her dropped due to insufficient evidence.

Public Document

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