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Zimbabwe: Release illegally detained human rights activists

Three human rights defenders who are being illegally detained by Zimbabwe's police must be immediately and unconditionally released, Amnesty International said today.

Fidelis Mudimu, Zachariah Godi and Tafadzwa Geza were arbitrarily arrested after police raided their offices in Harare on Monday and have since been illegally transferred more than 400km to Bulawayo.

The three men are senior staff members of the Counselling Services Unit (CSU) a registered medical clinic which provides medical and counselling services to victims of organized violence and torture.

Under Zimbabwean law detainees must be brought before a magistrate and formally charged within 48 hours or released.

"Amnesty International regards all three of these men as prisoners of conscience, arrested solely for their legitimate work assisting victims of torture," said Noel Kututwa, Amnesty International's southern Africa director.

"This flagrant bullying and intimidation of human rights defenders in Zimbabwe must end."

Amnesty International believes that the unlawful detention of the three men is part of a pattern of systematic harassment and intimidation of civil society by the government as it attempts to stifle dissent ahead of elections in 2013.

This is the second raid on the office of an NGO in Harare in less than three months. In August the office of Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) was raided by police twice and members were arrested and detained.

"We fear that these men, who are highly respected for their work with survivors of human rights abuses, may themselves become the victims of torture," said Noel Kututwa.

On Monday morning about a dozen police officers arrived at the CSU without a search warrant. Around two hours later they were joined by a truck load of anti-riot police who threatened to fire tear gas into the clinic when staff and patients refused them entry.

The police eventually produced a search warrant stating they were there to recover "offensive and subversive material". During the search they seized confidential medical records, a computer and documents which were not covered by the search warrant, and arrested the three men.

On Wednesday afternoon, at around the time they should have been charged or released under Zimbabwean law, the men were transferred 464 kilometres to Bulawayo having been reportedly told they were wanted by police there on charges relating to the subject of the search warrant. The CSU have no offices or premises in Bulawayo.

"The illegal transfer was made by bundling these men into an open pick up truck without protection from the sun, in spite of the long journey in temperatures exceeding 30 degrees Celsius," said Noel Kututwa. "The Zimbabwe police have once again demonstrated a modus operandi that falls far short of acceptable standards for police conduct and shows no regard whatsoever for the welfare of those in their custody," said Noel Kututwa.

"This situation is indicative of the Southern Africa Development Community's (SADC) failure to enforce reform of the security services in Zimbabwe as agreed in the Global Political Agreement. SADC must urgently act to stop this ongoing harassment and intimidation of civil society organisations in Zimbabwe."