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73rd Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 20 October – 9 December 2022

Agenda Item 10(i): Activity report of the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders and focal point on reprisals in Africa

Honourable Chairperson,

Amnesty International welcomes this opportunity to address the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Commission) following the presentation of the inter-session activity report of the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders and focal point for reprisals in Africa.

On 19 July 2022, Amnesty International launched a global campaign titled “Protect the protest” in response to the unprecedented and growing threat to the right to protest across all regions of the world. The campaign challenges attacks on peaceful protest. Through the campaign, Amnesty International also seeks to stand by those who dare to stand up and make their voices heard, such as Dorgelesse Nguessan of Cameroon and Joanah Mamombe, Netsai Marova and Cecilia Chimhiri of Zimbabwe. The story of these four women exemplifies a common trend: the stigmatization and criminalization of protesters as part of governments' attempt to deter them and others from joining in or sympathizing with their actions and their calls.

Dorgelesse Nguessan is a 37-year-old hairdresser who was among over 500 people arrested when security forces fired rubber bullets, teargas and water cannons to disperse a peaceful protest held in September 2020 in Douala, Cameroon. She joined the protest as she was concerned about the state of the economy and the country as a whole. Upon her arrest, she was taken to a police station in Douala, where she was held in a cell with 22 other people. She also endured attempted sexual assault by a policeman during her detention at the police station.

Dorgelesse was later transferred to Douala central prison, where she now remains in detention. In February 2021, Dorgelesse was charged and tried before a military court with ‘insurrection, assembly, meetings and public demonstrations’. On 7 December 2021, the court found her guilty of the charges and sentenced her to five years in prison. She has appealed the verdict, but an appeal hearing has yet to be scheduled.

As of October 2022, 91 of the 500 people arrested at the September 2020 protests remain in prison after trial by military courts, on charges linked to their participation in the protest. Five were released on September 30 and a further 27 are due to be released on October 30, having served their sentences.

Amnesty International calls on the African Commission to urge Cameroonian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Dorgelesse Nguessan and all other protestors detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Joanah Mamombe, Netsai Marova and Cecilia Chimhiri were arrested on 13 May 2020 for leading anti-government protests over the way the Zimbabwean government handled the COVID-19 pandemic. While in police custody, they were forcibly disappeared and taken to another location where they were tortured and sexually assaulted. They were found two days later covered in bruises and taken to hospital. While in hospital, they were charged with offences related to the protests and prevented from speaking to journalists.



After stating that they could identify their attackers, Cecillia, Joanah and Netsai were rearrested on 10 June 2020 and charged with faking their own abduction. Their trial began in January 2022 and the government has still not investigated their abduction.

At the same time, Zimbabwe's already restricted civic space is now further threatened by the introduction of the Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill, especially concerning as its timing appears to be an attempt to control, silence and criminalise the work of civil society in the lead up to the General Election in July 2023. The rationale for the introduction of the bill was to curb money-laundering and the financing of terrorism as recommended by the Financial Action Task Force. Despite being removed from the grey list by the Financial Action Taskforce, authorities have continued to push for this bill.

During the parliamentary public consultations, many Zimbabweans rejected the bill in its current form. Yet the Government of Zimbabwe went further to introduce further amendments with excessively punitive, criminal and civil penalties for non-complying civil society. The Bill, now in its Third reading, sailed through the second reading controversially. If passed it would impose serious restrictions on the important work of civil society organizations in Zimbabwe.

Amnesty International calls on the African Commission to urge Zimbabwean authorities to immediately and unconditionally drop all the charges against Joanah Mamombe, Netsai Marova and Cecillia Chimbiri and end the harassment they face for peacefully exercising their right to protest. The African Commission should also urge Zimbabwean authorities to immediately withdraw the Private Voluntary Organisations Amendment Bill until it is subjected to public consultation and to remove any clauses that undermine the work of civil society organizations.

Thank you.