

URGENT ACTION

HOSPITALISED ACTIVISTS RISK BEING JAILED

On 13 May, three opposition activists, member of parliament Joana Mamombe, Cecilia Chimhiri and Netsai Marova, were arrested at a police roadblock in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, for leading an anti-government protest over the authorities' response to the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread hunger in the country. On the same day, they were forcibly disappeared from police custody. During their abduction they were sexually assaulted and tortured. On 15 May, they were found abandoned in Bindura, 87km from Harare, and have since been in hospital. No investigation has been initiated into their disappearance and their credible allegations of torture, including sexual assault. On 26 May, police charged the activists with gathering with intent to promote public violence and breach of peace.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Commissioner General of Police
Godwin T Matanga
Zimbabwe Republic Police
Police General Headquarters
Cnr 7th Street and Josiah Chinamano Avenue
Harare, Zimbabwe
Email: tandabantugodwinmatanga@gmail.com

Commissioner General Matanga,

I am deeply concerned about the enforced disappearance and torture, including sexual violence, suffered by three female opposition activists of the MDC Alliance – Joana Mamombe, Cecilia Chimhiri, and Netsai Marova, – and the charges brought against them of gathering with intent to promote public violence and breach of the peace.

Following their arrest on 13 May, they were taken to Harare Central Police Station where they were asked to get into another vehicle under the pretext that they were being taken to Warren Park Police Station. Thereafter, the activists were forcibly disappeared for two days. There are credible allegations that, during this time, they were subjected to torture, including sexually assault. On 15 May, they were found abandoned in Bindura. In its press statement issued on 18 May, the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission noted that the three activists were abducted, tortured and removed from protection of the law.

I am also concerned that the authorities have called their abduction fake without launching an investigation into their enforced disappearance from police custody, and the subsequent treatment they endured, capable of bringing those suspected of responsibility to justice. Instead, on 26 May, the authorities have charged the three women and deployed prison guards and police to their hospital and forcing them to wear prison clothing even though they were given bail.

I urge you to immediately and unconditionally drop the charges against the three activists and end the harassment against them; immediately launch an independent and effective investigation into the enforced disappearance of the activists from police custody and the sexual assault and torture they endured; and bring to justice in fair trials anyone suspected of criminal responsibility for the unlawful treatment of the activists.

Yours sincerely,

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Joanna Mamombe, an MDC Alliance legislator for Harare West, Cecilia Chimhiri, the MDC(A) Youth National Vice Chairperson and Netsai Marova, Youth Deputy Organising Secretary, were arrested on 13 May for leading an anti-government protest taking place that day over the authorities' response to the Covid-19 outbreak and hunger in the country. They were arrested at a police roadblock, manned by police and soldiers near Warren Park, along Bulawayo Road in Harare.

Following their arrest, they were taken to Harare Central Police Station where they were asked to get into another vehicle under the pretext that they were being taken to Warren Park Police Station. According to the activists, their heads were covered in sacks/hoods and they were driven to an unknown place where they were beaten on the soles of their feet, sexually assaulted and forced to eat human excreta. The state-owned newspaper, the Herald, reported on 14 May that the three were arrested and national police spokesperson Assistant Commissioner Paul Nyathi confirmed their arrest, though he was not aware of where they were being held. On the same day, the police denied that the activists were in their custody, through their official Twitter handle.

The three activists were then found in the early hours of Friday 15 May, dumped in Bindura, 87 km from Harare, with their clothes torn and badly assaulted. They have since been in hospital. Some government officials including the Minister of Justice, the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Media, Information and Broadcasting have dismissed their disappearance and claimed that it had been 'stage managed' by the opposition. The Minister of Justice has come out calling for their arrest.

On 26 May, police charged the three activists with breaching Section 37 of Criminal Code, that is gathering with intent to promote public violence, breach of peace in violation which provides for imprisonment up to five years or a fine or both and Section 5(3) and (1) of Statutory Instrument 99/20 that prohibits gatherings which provides for one year imprisonment or a fine or both. The Magistrate conducted a special court in hospital and the three were granted bail of ZWD\$1 000 and are required to report once a week at Harare Central Police Station and to continue residing at their given residential addresses and not to interfere with state witnesses until their matter is finalised. Since the hearing on 27 May, nine prison guards and four police officers have been deployed to their ward.

On June 4, The Minister of Home Affairs, released a statement accusing the three women of faking an abduction and accuses them of seeking benefits like scholarship in America. Authorities have also attacked Civil Society organisations that helped the women received medical attention including the two doctors who examined them

Zimbabwe is currently under lockdown due to COVID-19. The government has failed to adequately provide social protection, leaving more people in poverty and hunger. The World Food Programme (WFP) has appealed for international support to prevent millions of desperate Zimbabweans plunging deeper into hunger. The WFP estimates that the total number of food insecure people is 7.7million people in Zimbabwe which is more than half the population. The COVID-19 crisis has left many desperate and unable to put food on the table.

The demonstration led by Joana Mamombe, Cecilia Chimhiri and Netsai Marova, took place amid rising political tensions in the country over a Supreme Court Judgement that has left the main opposition party in a leadership wrangle – the judgment dismissed the opposition leader, Nelson Chamisa, and asked the opposition to reelect new leadership, which has been seen as an attempt to impose leadership on the opposition party. There are allegations of political interference with the judiciary and that the ruling party, ZANU PF, was behind the judgement. MDC Alliance members of parliament have vowed to disengage with Parliament as a protest over the meddling of ZANU PF with the internal affairs of the opposition party.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 20 July 2020.

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Joana Mamombe (she/her) Cecilia Chimhiri (she/her) and Netsai Marova (she/her)