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Zimbabwe: Abuse of human rights continues under unity government

Amnesty International today called on President Mugabe and Prime Minister Tsvangirai to fulfil their promise to reform state institutions, in a bid to end human rights violations that have continued in the country since the formation of the unity government one year ago.

Torture, harassment and politically motivated prosecutions of human rights defenders and perceived opponents have persisted, while villagers in parts of Zimbabwe have suffered ceaseless intimidation by supporters of former ruling party ZANU-PF.

"The Attorney General's office, police and army have been left to freely violate human rights in pursuit of a political agenda," said Erwin van der Borgh, Africa Director at Amnesty International.

"By delaying reform, the situation in Zimbabwe remains fragile as perpetrators continue to escape justice and are instead effectively given the all clear to continue violating human rights."

Amnesty International called on the unity government to end on-going harassment of human rights defenders. Several peaceful protests organized by civic movement Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) were violently broken up by police in 2009.

Seventeen human rights and political activists who were abducted by state security agents in 2008 continue to face charges that are widely believed to be trumped up. One of them, Jestina Mukoko, director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project, had her prosecution permanently stayed by the Supreme Court in September 2009 because of overwhelming evidence that she had been tortured.

"The government must end the incessant harassment of human rights activists and take steps to seriously protect rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly," said Erwin van der Borgh.

The Zimbabwean army and intelligence services, as well as the Attorney General's office, have remained under ZANU-PF control, following an agreement brokered by the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) in 2008. The police are co-chaired by ZANU-PF and MDC-T ministers.

"The onus is on President Mugabe and ZANU-PF to ensure that key institutions under their control are reformed to end the culture of impunity that still threatens stability in the country," said Erwin van der Borgh.

Amnesty International's call for reform comes amid reports that villagers in parts of Zimbabwe are being

threatened with violence by army backed supporters of ZANU-PF, in an attempt to force them to endorse the heavily criticized Kariba draft constitution.

The Kariba draft constitution, agreed by unity government parties in September 2007, has been strongly criticized by some civil society organizations as an attempt by the parties to impose a constitution without consultation.

Villagers in Mutoko, Muzarabani and MT. Darwin are reportedly being warned that they will face beatings unless they support the ZANU-PF position. Similar threats were made and materialised in the run up to the June 2008 presidential elections..

"These are early warning signs that the situation could deteriorate if no urgent measures are taken to stop state security agents from carrying out violent political campaigns."

"Past involvement on their part has resulted in gross human rights violations, including deaths and torture of perceived opponents."

The government has so far failed to investigate gross human rights violations allegedly carried out by security forces during the run-up to the second round of the 2008 presidential elections, which left at least 200 people dead, over 9,000 injured and tens of thousands displaced.

"The unity government must investigate past and present allegations of human rights violations by state security agents, including torture and ill treatment of detainees," said Erwin van der Borght.

Gross human rights violations have also been taking place within the army.

At least two soldiers were tortured to death in October 2009 while being interrogated by intelligence and military police officials in Harare. Another soldier was reported to have committed suicide while in solitary confinement and several others are still receiving medical treatment for injuries caused by torture.

The victims had been arrested along with at least 95 others, on suspicion of breaking into an armoury at Pomona barracks and stealing 21 guns.

"Zimbabwean state bodies are riddled with human rights abusers that in many cases carry out violations with impunity," said Erwin van der Borght.

"Without genuine reform of institutions this abuse is very likely to persist."

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