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Zimbabwe urged to allow debate on past human rights violations after police block art exhibitions

Amnesty International today called on Zimbabwe's Government to end repression of public debate on past and ongoing human rights violations, following the detention of a well known artist for work depicting atrocities committed in the 1980's.

Owen Maseko was arrested on 26 March after participating in a show at the Bulawayo National Art Gallery, which depicted atrocities that took place in the Matabeleland region, known as Gukuruhundi, in western Zimbabwe during the 1980s where thousands of people were killed, mainly by state security agents.

The artist who faces charges of "undermining the authority of the President", "inciting public violence" and "causing offence to people of a particular tribe, race, religion", under the Public Order And Security Act (POSA), was released on bail today and ordered to report to a police station every Friday.

"President Mugabe and Prime Minister Tsvangirai should demonstrate their commitment to end human rights violations in Zimbabwe by publicly condemning attempts by police to silence activists and all charges against Owen Maseko should be immediately and unconditionally withdrawn," said Erwin van der Borgh, Amnesty International's Africa programme director.

"Arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions and ongoing harassment and intimidation restrict the work of activists who are exercising their right to freedom of expression and contributing to the process of national healing as provided under the Global Political Agreement," said Erwin van der Borgh.

The Global Political Agreement signed by Zimbabwe's three main political parties in September 2008, acknowledges the need for "national healing, cohesion and unity in respect of victims of pre and post independence political conflicts" as well as the need for creation of "an environment of tolerance and respect among Zimbabweans".

Incessant harassment of human rights workers by Zimbabwean police has also forced two prominent human rights defenders, including a trade unionist, to leave Zimbabwe.

Okay Machisa, National Director of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights), fled the country after being detained by police on 23 March for his role in coordinating an exhibition at The Delta Gallery in Harare that was cancelled due to repeated harassment by police.

Police confiscated at least 65 photographs from the show, some of which featured victims of political violence in Zimbabwe in 2008, but were forced to return them following a High Court ruling.

Amnesty International delegates witnessed police reappear at the gallery after the launch, leaving only when they failed to locate Okay Machisa who had by then gone in hiding.

Three truck loads of police reportedly later returned and some remained throughout the night, while another group of police attempted to break into the ZimRights office.

Another high-profile human rights worker, Gertrude Hambira, Secretary General of the General Agriculture and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ), was forced to go into hiding for the second time in six months, after police raided her office on 24 February.

Continuing harassment by police of GAPWUZ staff has forced the union activist to remain outside of the country.

“We are extremely concerned that in the space of months two prominent human rights defenders have been forced to leave the country after attempting to discuss past and on-going human rights violations,” said Erwin van der Borgh.

“The recent police action against human rights defenders undermines the credibility of the unity government internationally and perpetuates the fear that past human rights violations may be repeated.”