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Zimbabwe: Stop harassing opponents of former government

The Zimbabwe authorities must stop harassing political opponents and government critics, Amnesty International said today, following the acquittal of a critic of President Robert Mugabe accused of plotting to overthrow him.

Roy Bennett, a Movement for Democratic Change official, had been charged with “conspiring to acquire arms with a view to disrupting essential services” following his arrest in February 2008. He was acquitted by a Harare court on Monday.

“While welcoming the acquittal of Roy Bennett, we remain concerned about persistent abuse of the law against perceived opponents of the former ZANU-PF government,” said Michelle Kagari Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for Africa.

“We urge the unity government to immediately end all malicious prosecutions of people exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.”

Roy Bennett was previously adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International in 2004 after he was sentenced to a 15-month jail term by a parliamentary committee.

Despite the creation of the unity government in February 2009, police continue to arbitrarily arrest and detain human rights activists, journalists and political activists aligned to the former opposition parties now sharing power in the inclusive government.

In the last three months human rights activists attempting to facilitate public debate on past human rights violations have been specifically targeted and their activities barred by police.

Between 26 and 28 April, police in Masvingo, Gweru and Chinhoyi stopped exhibitions of photographs depicting organised violence and torture that followed the March 2008 elections. The exhibitions were organised by the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights) to facilitate public debate as part of the national healing process.

In Masvingo, ZimRights’ regional chairperson Mr Joel Hita was arrested and detained overnight. He is still facing unspecified charges.