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Zimbabwe: International Organizations Call for End to Abductions of Activists

Rights Defenders Need International Protection

(Johannesburg, December 10, 2008) – With three human rights defenders abducted in less than one week by people suspected of working on behalf of the Zimbabwean authorities, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Open Society Institute called today for an immediate halt to abductions and for the abductees to be freed immediately.

The human rights groups came together to call on regional and international organizations to take strong action to protect those who fight for human rights in Zimbabwe. The abduction of activists is taking place at a time when the country is facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, including a cholera outbreak and severe food shortages for which the government is seeking international help.

“Behind the political crisis and health emergency, there is a worsening human rights crisis in Zimbabwe, with the most recent development being this unprecedented spate of abduction of human rights defenders,” said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International. “This shows the audacity of a regime that is desperate to stay in power, no matter what the cost. The only way out of this problem is through unified pressure from outside, in particular of African leaders.”

The organizations urged the African Union, the Southern African Development Community and the United Nations to lead the way in exerting pressure on President Mugabe and called on African leaders to issue a unanimous and public condemnation of such actions. They called for pressure to be placed on the authorities in Zimbabwe to observe their international obligations, end enforced disappearances, and investigate and hold those responsible to account.

“The situation in Zimbabwe is spiraling out of control,” said Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch. “The government has made clear it can’t end the humanitarian crisis and won’t end the vicious pursuit of its opponents. Regional and international leaders need urgently to respond.”

Harassment and ill-treatment of human rights defenders and their family members has intensified in recent days. Three human rights defenders and a family member of a prominent human rights lawyer have all been abducted, and their whereabouts remain unknown. The evidence points to officials working on behalf of or with the acquiescence of the Zimbabwean authorities.

“The fight to ensure that human rights are respected in Zimbabwe is more critical than it has ever been,” said Aryeh Neier, president of Open Society Institute. “The AU and SADC with the support of the UN should provide the leadership that would demonstrate that Africa has the capacity and the will to resolve a grave

crisis in a manner that mitigates the suffering of Zimbabweans.”

Although it remains unclear who abducted the four, the Zimbabwe authorities have a clear responsibility to determine and reveal the whereabouts of the abductees, the human rights groups said. Their failure to do this, let alone to acknowledge the abductions, places the abductees outside the protection of the law and may constitute an enforced disappearance which is a serious violation of international law.

“The way this case has been handled demonstrates the complete breakdown of the rule of law in Zimbabwe,” said Beatrice Mtetwa, an award winning human rights lawyer in Zimbabwe who is handling the case. “Citizens have not been able to rely on the courts for protection.”

Background on the Abductions:

- On December 3, 2008, Jestina Mukoko, the director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP), a national human rights organization, was forcibly taken from her home in Norton, Harare, early in the morning by about 15 men in plain clothes - some armed with handguns - who identified themselves as police from the Law and Order section of the Zimbabwe Republic Police. However, police in Zimbabwe have denied holding Ms Mukoko. Ms. Mukoko’s lawyers submitted a habeas corpus application to the High Court on Friday, December 5, but no judge has yet agreed to hear the case.
- On December 5, at around midnight, Zacharia Nkomo, the brother of Harrison Nkomo - another leading human rights lawyer who was working on Jestina Mukoko’s case - was abducted by four unidentified men in civilian clothes from his home in Rujeko, Masvingo. The men responsible for the abduction were travelling in two green-and-silver Toyota Virgo twin cabs.
- On December 8, two Zimbabwe Peace Project employees, Broderick Takawira, a provincial coordinator and Pascal Gonzo, a driver, were abducted by five unidentified men who forcibly entered the group’s premises in Mount Pleasant, Harare. The unidentified men -- who were in civilian clothes --forced the two men into one of six Mazda “Familia” sedans that were waiting outside.

Other employees of the group have also reported being followed by unknown persons in other parts of Zimbabwe.