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Zimbabwe: Amnesty International accuses government of using food for political gain

Amnesty International today called on the government of Zimbabwe to immediately lift its ban on field operations by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and accused the government of using food for political ends.

“The suspension of field operations by all NGOs on the order of the Zimbabwean government is likely to increase food insecurity in Zimbabwe and expose millions of people to hunger,” said Amnesty International.

“The suspension of NGO operations is yet another attempt by the government to manipulate food distribution for political ends,” said Amnesty International.

“Suspension of humanitarian operations by NGOs ensures that the government has a monopoly over food distribution through the state-controlled Grain Marketing Board (GMB) during the pre-election period.”

Since 2000, Amnesty International has documented how GMB food has been used as a political tool against perceived government opponents.

Amnesty International said that the restrictions will not only have a detrimental effect on food security in Zimbabwe, but also serve as a means for the government to prevent aid workers from witnessing the sharply increased levels of state-sponsored political violence taking place in the country since presidential and parliamentary elections were held on 29 March.

“By closing off the space for NGOs in Zimbabwe, the government is attempting to hide the worst of the human rights violations taking place in the country,” said Amnesty International

“The Zimbabwean authorities must ensure that food is distributed to all on the basis of need -- irrespective of real or perceived political affiliation.”

“Humanitarian organisations and other NGOs should be allowed go about their legitimate work without interference. By deliberately blocking life-sustaining aid, the government of Zimbabwe may be violating the right of its citizens to life, food, and health.”

Notes to editors

Without giving specific reasons for his action, the Zimbabwean Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, Nicholas Goche, wrote to all private voluntary organisations and NGOs on 4 June 2008, instructing them to stop their operations.

The Minister gave his intention to invoke Section (10), Subsection (c), of the Private Voluntary Organisations Act [Chapter 17:05] as the basis for his action.

The poorest Zimbabweans will be worst affected by the ban. They will be increasingly exposed to life-threatening diseases, since the suspension affects water and sanitation projects. The ban will also severely impact the care of Zimbabwe's over one million children orphaned by AIDS, and the terminally ill who are on home-based care programmes.

This is not the first time that government policies and practices in Zimbabwe have exacerbated Zimbabwe's food security problems. In 2005, Operation Murambatsvina, the government's programme of mass forced evictions, resulted in hundreds of thousands of women, men and children being made homeless, without access to adequate food, water and sanitation, or healthcare.

Since 2000, millions of people in Zimbabwe have had great difficulty in gaining access to adequate food. One of the major causes of the food crisis in Zimbabwe has been the drop in domestic food production. While climatic factors, the HIV/AIDS pandemic and economic problems have all played a role in declining agricultural productivity, government policies and practices have exacerbated Zimbabwe's food security problems.