

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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ZIMBABWE: AUTHORITIES MUST END ESCALATING CRACKDOWN ON HUMAN RIGHTS AHEAD OF SADC SUMMIT

Amnesty International is gravely concerned about the escalating crackdown on human rights including repression of civic space, arbitrary arrests of opposition members, activists, human rights defenders (HRDs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) representatives, and intimidation, harassment and threats against peaceful protesters in Zimbabwe ahead of the 44th Ordinary Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), scheduled to take place on 17 August in Harare.

Amnesty International urges the Zimbabwean authorities to immediately and unconditionally release those arrested solely for peacefully exercising their human rights and drop the trumped-up charges against them. Their continued arbitrary detention is in violation of their rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and liberty.

Amnesty International is seriously concerned about the arbitrary detention since 16 June of over 160 people, comprising members of the opposition, activists and human rights defenders, some of whom have allegedly been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment. Those arrested are being charged with offences against public order under the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act with most of them being charged with 'Disorderly conduct in public space' on the pretext that they were planning to protest ahead of the SADC Summit. One person was charged with 'Public violence' for participating in an anti-government protest 5 years ago in January 2019.

On 16 June, the police arrested and arbitrarily detained 78 people, including Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) interim party leader Jameson Timba, while they were celebrating the International Day of the African Child at a private residence. During their arrest, the police used baton sticks and fired teargas at the group, resulting in injuries; including an extensive injury to one member which required surgery. On 17 June, the 78 people were charged with 'gathering with intent to promote public violence and disorderly conduct' and held for over 48 hours in custody before appearing before a court on 18 June, in violation of Section 50 of Zimbabwe's Constitution, and the Criminal Procedure and Evidence Act which states that 'any person who is arrested or detained must be brought before a court as soon as possible and in any event not later than forty-eight hours after the arrest took place or the detention began'. Of the 78 people who were originally arrested and remanded, two children have since been released and one person granted bail.

On 27 June, the group was denied bail on the grounds that they will 'commit similar offences if released'. On 17 July, the bail application for the 75 people including a mother and her one-year-old baby was dismissed by the High Court. The arrest and arbitrary detention of the activists is deeply concerning and a violation of Zimbabwe's constitutional and international human rights obligations including under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which the country is a state party. Amnesty International is concerned with the misuse of the criminal justice system as a tool to harass and intimidate protesters.

In 2023, Amnesty International published a briefing titled '*Zimbabwe: Human Rights Under Attack*' highlighting Zimbabwe's human rights record since 2018. Our briefing highlighted how the Zimbabwe government suppressed peaceful dissent through arbitrarily arresting those who exercised their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. We further noted how all those who had been arrested for expressing peaceful dissent and convicted by the magistrates' court were subsequently acquitted after appealing to the High Court. This trend gives credence to the view that the government has weaponized the criminal justice system against individuals for expressing peaceful dissent.

The trend of suppressing dissent has continued with those in government and the ruling party issuing threats against people who want to protest ahead of the 44th SADC summit. On 27 June, while addressing the ZANU PF Central Committee, President Mnangagwa warned against “rogue elements in the form of opposition political parties bent on peddling falsehoods and instigating acts of civil disorder, especially before, during and after regional and world state events” and said, “such acts would be dealt with decisively”. On 28 June, the Minister of Information, Publicity and Broadcasting issued a statement warning against “criminal and opportunistic elements within the opposition, certain politicians, and some civil society organizations” and that law enforcement will apprehend those who “undermine the justice delivery through causing chaos and mayhem”. On 31 July, the Presidential spokesperson, during an interview with The Herald, accused “western aligned organisations” of subversion saying “these organisations seem to find willing partners within our country, who previously had a brush with the law. It would appear they haven’t learnt their lessons. They should know that the Government is not just willing but is capable of delivering to them a lesson that is handsomely appropriate. It is treachery for a Zimbabwean to collude with a foreign organisation in the hope of undermining the country’s peace, it is worse when the government considers the organisation hostile”.

To date, over 160 people have been arrested including opposition political party members, activists and human rights defenders, under various charges. Some activists have been beaten and tortured before taken into custody.

Amnesty International urges the authorities to promptly, independently, impartially, transparently and effectively investigate the allegations of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees and hold any suspected perpetrators accountable in fair proceedings. As President Mnangagwa assume the position of SADC Chairperson, Amnesty International also urges the Zimbabwe authorities to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of everyone in the country including the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Additionally, we urge SADC leaders and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights to publicly condemn the Zimbabwe government’s human rights violations and demand the immediate and unconditional release of those arbitrarily detained solely for peacefully exercising their human rights.