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EMALAWI

@Fears for the safety of pro-democracy activists

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Amnesty International is concerned about apparent attempts to assassinate a church leader in the movement for multi-party democracy in Malawi. Other pro-democracy activists have been arrested, beaten or threatened with violence.

The Reverend Emmanuel Chinkwita Phiri, Acting General Secretary of the Christian Council of Malawi and head of the Baptist church in Malawi, is a member of the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), which represents churches, professional bodies and other groups lobbying for political reform in Malawi. He believes that on three recent occasions there have been attempts to kill him.

The most recent incident occurred on 4 January 1993, when the Reverend Chinkwita Phiri was at a bus stop on the outskirts of the Malawian capital of Lilongwe late at night. A car drove at high speed directly at him and he was only saved by a friend who pulled him out of its path. Eyewitnesses believed the car had deliberately aimed to hit him. On two separate earlier occasions, in November and December 1992, it appeared that he had been the victim of an attempt to poison him by impregnating his clothes with organo-phosphate poisons, which function by interfering with the transmission of nerve impulses, leading to impairment of basic body functions and, in some cases, to irreversible damage and death.

In November 1992 the PAC met a United Nations' technical team which was preparing an advisory report on the forthcoming referendum on whether to retain the one-party system or adopt a multi-party system. The Reverend Chinkwita Phiri was wearing a suit which he had just collected from the dry cleaners. As the meeting proceeded

he became aware of a burning sensation around his neck and shoulders. He left the meeting and went home to bed, where he developed a fever, rapid heartbeat and a burning sensation. He was taken to hospital, given medication and gradually recovered.

In December 1992 when he was part of a Christian Council of Malawi delegation visiting Kenya he suffered a similar sensation and again had to receive medical treatment. As on the first occasion he believed that his clothes had been poisoned.

Recently published evidence has shown that in the 1970s the Rhodesian security forces made extensive use of organo-phosphate poisons against the Zimbabwean nationalist opposition. In 1989, the Reverend Frank Chikane, general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, was apparently victim of a similar attack to that on the Reverend Chinkwita Phiri when his clothes were treated with organo-phosphates and he became extremely ill during a visit to the USA. It seemed that his luggage had been interfered with on leaving South Africa. There is a long history of security co-operation between Malawi and South Africa.

Amnesty International cannot provide independent confirmation of these incidents. However, it should be borne in mind that the Malawian Government has apparently resorted to political assassinations on a number of occasions in the past. In 1983, three government ministers and a member of parliament were killed, ostensibly in a road accident, after last being seen alive in official custody. The same year a leading opposition figure in exile, Attati Mpakati, was killed in Harare, Zimbabwe. He had earlier been maimed by a parcel bomb in Maputo, Mozambique. In 1989 opposition journalist Mkwapatira Mhango and members of his family died in a firebomb attack on their house in Lusaka, Zambia. More recently, taped evidence indicated that senior members of the ruling Malawi Congress Party discussed killing the country's Roman Catholic bishops after their Pastoral Letter in March 1992 to all their churches in which they criticized the government for violating human rights and democratic principles.

Amnesty International is also concerned for the physical safety of many other multi-party campaigners in the period leading up to the referendum to be held on 14 June 1993. The Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), one of the two internal opposition groups campaigning for multi-party democracy, has alleged that the Malawian Government has sent security agents to monitor opposition representatives, particularly in neighbouring countries. They fear that this may be in preparation for assassination attempts. Other pro-democracy activists, including church leaders, PAC members and other government opponents, have also expressed similar fears for their safety. Some have received threats of violence against them, some have been arrested or harassed by police, others have been beaten by the official para-military Malawi Young Pioneers. There have been mysterious attacks on the homes or property of some of these activists. Those in prison have also at times expressed fears of attempts to poison them or to deliberately make them ill through denial of medical treatment.

Amnesty International is urgently seeking assurances from the Malawian Government that the physical safety of multi-party campaigners will be guaranteed.

What you can do:

Please undertake the following actions:

- write to Life-President Kamuzu Banda, the Minister of State and the Inspector-General of Police, expressing concern about the alleged attacks on Reverend Chinkwita Phiri and calling for assurances of the safety of multi-party campaigners in the period before the referendum.

His Excellency the Life-President Mr John Tembo

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- draw Amnesty International's concerns about the safety of multi-party campaigners to the attention of your home government.
- inform church organizations in your countries about the alleged attacks on Reverend Chinkwita Phiri and ask them to appeal to the Malawian authorities for assurances of his safety.
- publicise your appeals as appropriate.