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### **MALAWI MASS ARRESTS AS POLICE CRACK DOWN ON THE FAX REVOLUTION**

Hundreds of people have been arrested over the last four months in Malawi, as the government tries to stop an unprecedented upsurge of opposition, said Amnesty International.

Since May 1992 the police have been raiding offices and homes, searching for supporters of the multi-party movement. Sometimes, as at the computer section of the Electricity Supply Commission of Malawi, the entire staff of an office has been arrested, simply because police suspect that their photocopiers have been used to reproduce multi-party literature. Anyone with a fax machine may face police harassment because these have been used to send anti-government messages.

In a report released today the international human rights organization said that many people are still detained without charge, held in very overcrowded conditions, and that some have reportedly been tortured.

"The government is facing unexpected opposition and it is reacting with repression," said Amnesty International. "We have reports of 285 people being crammed into one small cell, of people being kept in leg irons, of severe beatings and electric shocks. One woman was stripped naked, beaten and poked with an electric cattle prod. There is also a frightening pattern of deaths in custody."

Malawi is a one-party state, headed by Life-President Dr H. Kamuzu Banda. Several penalties face anyone who tries to exercise the right to free expression. In response to international criticism of its human rights record, the government has recently released some long-term political detainees, including one man held for 27 years, but active dissenters are still imprisoned without charge or indicted for sedition.

Open public debate on the country's political future dates from a pastoral letter issued in March this year by the country's Roman Catholic bishops. The letter was read out in churches across the land and 16,000 copies were printed. In it, the bishops criticized the government's human rights record and called for greater democracy - the government declared the letter seditious and it is now an offence to have a copy.

Ruling party leaders publicly threatened the bishops with execution, and the press where the pastoral letter was printed suffered a firebomb attack. Since then many more people have been arrested - leading to severe overcrowding in prisons, possibly a deliberate tactic of ill-treatment by the authorities. There are reports that prison authorities have refused to allow inmates to empty the buckets they use as toilets, with the result that cells become flooded with urine and faeces. Political detainees are forced to clear up excrement with their bare hands.

Victims of the repression have included dozens of office workers, members of religious groups, students and trade unionists. Veteran trade union leader Chakufwa Chihana, for example, was arrested in April as he tried to read a speech. He was held in leg irons, cut off from the outside world, and several times police failed to present him in court. Eventually he was charged with sedition and released on bail - but four days later he was back behind bars after police took him into custody. It appears that the authorities plan to file further sedition charges.

**"The government has taken some steps to improve respect for human rights - possibly more than 60 political detainees have been released this year - but that is all undermined by these continuing arrests. They must stop and the government must take action to prevent such abuses in the future."**

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