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Zimbabwe: Urgent need for security sector reform to stem human rights abuses

On the second anniversary of the Government of National Unity (GNU), Amnesty International is urging Zimbabwe's coalition government to act on ongoing human rights abuses and to institute reforms of the security sector and the media.

Two years since the unity government was set up in Zimbabwe, Amnesty International is concerned about lack of progress in implementing key reforms to address the legacy of human rights abuses.

The hope for an end to a decade of human rights abuses that greeted the unity government two years ago, is rapidly fading away and has been replaced by fear and instability amid talk of another election in 2011.

In recent weeks, supporters of President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF party in Harare have targeted perceived supporters of the MDC-T formation led by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai, with violence with the tacit approval of the police.

On 21 January 2011, Amnesty International delegates witnessed one such incident of violence where ZANU-PF supporters protesting at Harare's Town House were beating members of the public in the presence of anti-riot police. A high school student was beaten by the mob for taking a photograph, while a young woman wearing an MDC-T t-shirt was beaten and stripped. Anti-riot police monitoring the 'protest' did not intervene to assist the victims. The two were seriously injured and needed medical treatment.

It is an open secret that ZANU-PF supporters who use violence against members of the public or their perceived political opponents are beyond the reach of the law. Police continue to selectively apply the law – turning a blind eye to violations by ZANU-PF supporters while restricting the work of human rights organisations and the activities of other political parties.

Amnesty International has received reports from Harare's high density suburb of Mbare where MDC-T supporters were attacked and some forcibly evicted from their homes by ZANU-PF supporters. Police failed to protect those attacked and even arrested victims who came to report the incidents.

Thousands of people in rural areas live in fear of violence amid talk that the country might hold another election in 2011. Concrete reforms of the security sector are urgently needed before the next elections are held. The security apparatus that instigated the 2008 political violence is still intact.

Amnesty International is concerned about continued arbitrary arrest and unlawful detention of human rights activists who are going about their legitimate work protected under international human rights law. On Wednesday, the director of the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum and two members of staff were detained by the Law and Order Section at Harare Central Police Station for conducting a survey on transitional justice.

Security sector reform is needed in Zimbabwe to end a legacy of partisan policing and abuse of the law to achieve political goals.

While some progress has been registered in stabilization of the economy since the creation of the unity government, the continued violation of civil and political rights is undermining the country's ability to secure those gains.

Amnesty International is also concerned that two years after the unity government was formed no single broadcasting licence has been issued by the authorities despite promises made to guarantee increased enjoyment of freedom of expression. Media workers continue to be targeted with arrest and violence. On 7 February alleged ZANU-PF supporters in Harare's central business district beat up vendors from the *Newsday* – an independent newspaper.

Amnesty International urged the three principals in the unity government, particularly President Robert Mugabe, whose ZANU-PF party effectively controls the security forces – including police, to act against human rights violations by security agents and begin reforms to address the legacy of impunity, by putting in place an independent body to investigate human rights violations by the security forces and holding perpetrators accountable.

The government should fully implement Article 12.1(b) of the Global Political Agreement, which provides for training programmes and workshops for police and other law enforcement agents.

Part of the current human rights problems in Zimbabwe today are a direct result of the weak oversight mechanism put in place by the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and the African Union (AU), the guarantors to the agreement that led to the setting up of the unity government. Despite numerous trips to Harare by members of the mediation team headed by President Jacob Zuma of South Africa no meaningful progress has been made in implementing key reforms meant to guarantee peace and security in the country.

SADC and the AU have missed every opportunity to end human rights violations in Zimbabwe. The oversight mechanism has proved inadequate as it has allowed political bickering to continue at the expense of reforms that would have resulted in increased enjoyment of human rights and ensuring that the next election in Zimbabwe would be free from violence.