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Zimbabwe: Hundreds detained in politically-motivated crackdown

The government of Zimbabwe should immediately and unconditionally release more than 1400 people, most of them polling agents and civil society election observers, who were arrested nationwide, mostly on Monday 11 March, and detained in police custody following last weekend's presidential election, Amnesty International said today.

The organization has received information of a pattern of mass arbitrary detention of hundreds of polling agents belonging to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Those arrested also include election observers from civil society organizations belonging to the Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) who were refused accreditation by the government. A third group comprises individuals accused of trying to vote for a second time.

Several human rights sources in Zimbabwe have reported that police and security intelligence officers from the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) are targeting ZESN monitors for harassment and detention under orders from superiors.

"We are deeply concerned for the safety of those arrested in the light of the well-established pattern of "disappearances", cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment by Zimbabwean security forces," Amnesty International said.

A lawyer with the civil society organization Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, who visited cells at the Harare Central Police station described the congested conditions as hazardous to the detainees' health.

Those arrested have been denied food, and cannot lie down to sleep because of overcrowding.

In Manicaland Province, for example, police arrested 130 polling agents and observers. In Murambinda, also in Manicaland Province, 27 observers from both the MDC and ZESN were detained and denied access to lawyers. Within the hour, 50 people were arrested in Mutoko town in Mashonaland East Province, another in the Harare suburb of Mabvuku.

"The arrests of these Zimbabweans is politically-motivated; the government must either charge those in detention with a recognizable criminal offence based on solid evidence or release them immediately," Amnesty International said.

Background

The election that began on 9 March 2002 has been characterized by intimidation of opposition supporters and denial of accreditation to the vast majority of election monitors from civil society organizations. In the early morning hours of 8 March, militias across the country set up illegal road-blocks to prevent the MDC from deploying its polling agents, in what appeared to be an orchestrated campaign directed by the government. Amnesty International received several reports of attacks, often resulting in serious injuries.

As voting got under way, pro-government militia members were reportedly trying to intimidate potential opposition supporters from casting ballots. Two men in Karoyi, for example were beaten for over an hour by militia members because they had allegedly been transported to the polling station at Tavoy Farm by a white person. Another man, an MDC polling agent, in Karoyi was abducted by ZANU-PF youth during a lunch break and badly beaten all over his body and on the soles of his feet.

Although the High Court ordered that all polling stations remain open in the country for a third day of voting on Monday 11 March, the government opened only those in Harare and Chitungwiza, where voters were casting ballots for a mayor and a city council as well as the president.

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