

AI Index: PRE 01/077/2013  
14 February 2013

## **Zimbabwe: Arrest of peaceful protestors casts doubt on possibility of credible referendum**

Attacks by the police on Zimbabwean human rights defenders cast doubt on the country's ability to hold a credible constitutional referendum and election this year, Amnesty International said today after peaceful protestors were arrested and beaten.

Eight members of Zimbabwean women's social justice movement, Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), were arrested outside the Zimbabwean parliament in Harare yesterday after they handed out roses and teddy bears during their annual Valentines Day demonstration.

The arrests coincided with the announcement by the government that 16 March had been set as a tentative date for the constitutional referendum and that elections could be held some time in July.

The women, who included, WOZA leaders Jenni Williams and Magodonga Mahlangu were arrested after police fired tear gas at the peaceful demonstration and beat protestors with baton sticks. A man who took a picture of the women being arrested was also arrested. They were later released without charge.

"This most recent incident sounds yet another alarm bell for the exercise of internationally guaranteed rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly in advance of the referendum on a new constitution and elections later this year," said Amnesty International's southern Africa director Noel Kututwa.

"Human rights violations by the police, including arbitrary arrests and raids at offices of human rights defenders, go against the calls for tolerance made by President Mugabe and Prime Minister Tsvangirai."

In recent months Amnesty International has documented a series of arbitrary arrests and raids targeted at key human rights groups suggesting the space for political dissent is narrowing as the country prepares for the referendum and election.

On Monday police raided the office of the Zimbabwean Peace Project (ZPP) in Harare.

Five police officers stormed the ZPP office with a warrant to search for "subversive material and illegal immigrants".

No one was arrested during the incident but police seized equipment and confidential documents.

In an apparent violation of the search warrant police returned to the ZPP offices at night and attempted to search the offices for the second time. The warrant only authorised the police to search the offices by day time.

The director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project, Jestina Mukoko, was one of a number of human rights

defenders who were abducted in 2008 by state-security agents. She was subject to torture during her abduction.

Okay Machisa, the director of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights) was finally released on bail on 29 January after two weeks in custody when the High Court overruled an earlier dismissal of his bail application.

Leo Chamahwinya, another ZimRights employee, arrested on 13 December 2012 remains in custody and has been repeatedly denied bail.

The ZimRights staff activists are being charged with publishing falsehoods, fraud and forgery after allegedly conducting illegal voter registration.

“Zimbabwe is entering a critical period in its democratization process and these blatant attempts to silence and intimidate critics must end,” said Kututwa.