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## **Zimbabwe: Prominent human rights defender hunted down through the media**

The alert issued by Zimbabwe police on state television implying that prominent human rights defender Jestina Mukoko was on the run from the law is a new low in the recent crackdown on dissent, Amnesty International said.

On Thursday night, Zimbabwe state-owned television ran two announcements implying that Mukoko, the director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project, was on the run and the announcements urged members of the public to call the police with any information about her whereabouts.

Mukoko, who was at her home when the announcements were made, voluntarily reported to Harare Central Police station Friday morning. She was charged with several counts then released into the custody of her lawyers.

“It is appalling that at this critical time when Zimbabwe is in the process of adopting a new constitution which provides a stronger bill of human rights, human rights defenders are coming under systematic attack,” said Noel Kututwa, Amnesty International’s southern Africa director.

“The use of state media to publically portray Mukoko as some kind of fugitive is a regrettable new low for the government.”

Mukoko was charged with several counts including operating a private voluntary organisation without registration under the Private Voluntary Organisations Act. ZPP is registered under a deed of trust with the High Court like most other human rights groups in Zimbabwe.

Early in February, the ZPP was raided by police who had a warrant to search for “subversive material and illegal immigrants.” They seized material including project documents, four smart phones and 80 solar powered/crank radio receivers.

On 19 February the police announced a ban on short wave radios in Zimbabwe. It is not clear under which law this ban was made and how it will be implemented.

However, following the ban, police searched the offices of Radio Dialogue in Bulawayo and seized 180 radios and charged Zenzele Ndebele, the station manager, under section 182 of the Customs and Exercise Act.

The ban on short wave radio receivers is seen as an attempt by police to curb access to alternative sources of news as the country prepares for the constitutional referendum on 16 March and a possible election in July.

“This pattern of repressive behaviour by Zimbabwe’s security forces, and the use of underhand tactics to

incriminate human rights defenders, must end,” said Kututwa.

“The referendum scheduled for next weekend and the elections that follow must take place in an environment that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms.”