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Zimbabwe: Women forced to flee their homes for refusing to reveal their vote

Women political activists in rural Zimbabwe told Amnesty International they have been threatened with violence and forced to flee with their children for refusing to reveal their vote to supporters of Robert Mugabe's party during harmonized elections.

The women said they resisted instructions from Zanu-PF supporters to feign illiteracy, blindness or physical injury, which would have meant someone else marking the ballot on their behalf,

At least six women said they left home with their 12 young children after facing intimidation from village heads in Mukumbura district, Mashonaland Central Province soon after the 31 July poll.

"It appears the ZANU-PF supporters wanted to ensure that these women did not vote for the other parties and tried to compromise the secrecy of the ballot," said Noel Kututwa, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Africa.

"The Zimbabwean police must guarantee the safety of political activists in rural areas following these reports of politically motivated displacement. The authorities have a duty to investigate any threats of violence and ensure those responsible are brought to justice."

The families say they were targeted due to their support - real or perceived - for the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party led by Morgan Tsvangirai.

During the last election there was a significant number of rural voters who were recorded as "assisted voters" for reasons including illiteracy or inability to mark the ballot for themselves. Zimbabwe has above 90 per cent literacy which is the highest literacy level in Africa.

The displaced women activists, some of whom said they had to leave children behind, told Amnesty International that more families are in the same predicament and remain stranded in the Mukumbura district under threat of violence.

One woman, who did not wish to be named due to fears for her safety, said she had first been threatened in her village two weeks before the election. She said she reported the matter to the police, but no action was taken.

A similar incident was also reported in Mberengwa district, Midlands province, where an MDC candidate was forced to flee her home with three of her children over the weekend.

"The election observers still in Zimbabwe must investigate the reports of politically motivated displacement in rural areas, and put pressure on the government to ensure human rights are protected," said Noel Kututwa.

"While the election was conducted in a largely peaceful environment, it is disturbing that these incidents are happening unabated. Police should take action against village heads or others steering the disturbances in rural areas."

President Mugabe won the presidential poll with 61 per cent of the vote, amid claims of electoral fraud from the MDC and some election observers.