

AI Index: PRE 01/434/2012
14 September 2012

Zimbabwe: Members of the public at risk as police crack down on gang suspects

Amnesty International urges the Zimbabwe police to act with restraint and ensure members of the public are not placed at risk as they conduct a crack down on groups of people suspected to have been involved in recent outbreaks of violence in Harare.

On Wednesday the police arrested 308 people following clashes between soldiers and touts controlling minibus stations. Amnesty International believes that given the randomness of the police operation the detainees may include innocent members of the public who are at a high risk of being tortured.

Eyewitnesses reported that members of the public had been beaten and caught in the police sweep. Regular police, supported by anti-riot and military police were seen beating suspected touts in Harare.

“The Zimbabwe police’s attempt to restore law and order has resulted in further chaos and placed members of the public at immediate risk. They are roaming the streets carrying out random beatings and whippings which is absolutely unacceptable,” said Noel Kututwa, Southern Africa director for Amnesty International.

“The government must act immediately to bring the police under control. The 308 people already detained must be brought before a court immediately. Innocent members of the public also arrested during the police action must be released immediately and unconditionally.”

The minibus touts, known as *mandimbandimba*, are suspected to be linked to the notorious Chipangano gang and control most of the public bus ranks in Harare extorting money from minibus drivers. Chipangano has over the years used violence to wrestle control of many small businesses and market stalls across the capital. The gang is affiliated with President Mugabe’s Zanu-PF party and as a result has enjoyed relative impunity despite being accused of violence against members of the public

Clashes between the touts and the military began last week when two soldiers were beaten by minibus touts. This prompted revenge attacks by a group of about 20 soldiers early this week.

“These events in Harare are just a tip of the iceberg. Gangs linked to President Mugabe’s ZANU-PF party have been enjoying total impunity for human rights

abuses against their political opponents and members of the public,” said Kututwa.

“The culture of impunity that permeates Zimbabwe’s security forces needs to be urgently addressed. In the run up to the constitutional referendum and elections when tensions are high, it is imperative that Zimbabwe is policed by a body that upholds the highest standards of impartiality.”

Amnesty International calls on the police and army authorities to act immediately against the deep rooted culture of impunity by members of the security forces and to investigate incidences of collusion between them and criminal gangs.

There have been consistent reports of human rights violations by security forces against perceived political opponents and members of the public. Similarly the police have been accused of handing criminals over to Chipangano gang members who have subjected them to torture before they were taken back into custody and charged.

Notes to editors

* The Chipangano gang appears to have grown out of control with its leaders using their growing influence to enrich themselves through rent seeking activities mainly in the township of Mbare. In recent weeks ZANU-PF leaders, including the party’s secretary for administration, Didymus Mutasa have attempted to distance the party from the gang and to reign in its activities. In recent weeks one of the group leaders was questioned by police and released following an incident where municipal police demolishing illegal car sales businesses were fired at.