

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 46/014/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 124
14 May 2004

Zimbabwe: Food must not be used as a political tool

Amnesty International today expressed grave concern at the Zimbabwe government's moves to end international food aid distribution, despite independent assessments which predict that millions of Zimbabweans will need food aid in the coming 12 months.

"If independent assessments are correct, the risk is that food will be used for political ends and food supplies will go first and only to supporters of the ruling party", the organization warned.

The government has told international donors that it will not need food aid this year. On 7 May the government stopped a UN Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission from evaluating the current harvest. This was followed by statements in the state-controlled Herald newspaper, attributed to the Minister for Agriculture, claiming that Zimbabwe has produced more grain than it needs this year.

However, earlier predictions by food security monitors and the United Nations, and a crop survey carried out in March by independent consultants for the German-based Friedrich Ebert Foundation, all suggest that the 2004 harvest will fall far short of national requirements.

Amnesty International visited Zimbabwe in February 2004, at which time numerous sources within the agricultural sector confirmed that food production would fall far short of needs in 2004/5.

Both rural and urban populations will be affected. With unemployment currently at approximately 70% and inflation hovering around 600% it is increasingly difficult for many Zimbabweans to access adequate food in the marketplace.

Amnesty International is gravely concerned that the present actions of the government of Zimbabwe may be an attempt to control food supplies ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for March 2005.

If the true crop production figures for 2004 are as low as many reliable sources expect then, in the absence of international food aid, a significant proportion of Zimbabwe's population may, later in 2004 and into 2005, find itself reliant on grain controlled by the state-controlled Grain Marketing Board (GMB).

"Political manipulation of food, particularly state-controlled GMB grain, by officials and supporters of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) has been widely reported over the past two years. ZANU-PF has repeatedly used food as an electioneering tool. Viewed against a history of political manipulation of food the government's current actions are a cause for grave concern," Amnesty International said.

It is unclear how much grain the GMB has in reserve, as there is no independent assessment of GMB stocks. However, it is unlikely to be sufficient to meet the cereal gap of 500-800,000 metric tonnes which independent observers predict for the coming year.

Amnesty International reminds the Zimbabwe government that, as a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICSECR), it has an obligation to uphold the right of all Zimbabweans to food. The UN committee responsible for monitoring the Convention has stated that governments must use all the resources at their disposal, including those available through international assistance. Discrimination in access to food on any grounds, including political affiliation, is a violation of the ICSECR. The committee has also stated that food should not be used as an instrument of political pressure-

Amnesty International further reminds the government of Zimbabwe that all human rights are indivisible and interrelated. Violations of the right to food may impinge on many other rights, including the right to life itself.

Amnesty is calling on the Zimbabwe authorities to respect the right of all Zimbabweans to food and to immediately allow the UN to conduct a crop assessment mission, with a view to ensuring that any possible food aid needs are adequately addressed. Amnesty International further calls on the government of Zimbabwe to take immediate steps to make the operations of the GMB transparent, and open to independent monitoring.

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