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Amnesty International says failure of African leadership is prolonging the Zimbabwe human rights crisis

Amnesty International harshly criticized the African Union's (AU) lack of action on Zimbabwe, as detained Zimbabwean human rights activist Jestina Mukoko appeared in a court in Harare today after having been tortured.

"Ongoing arrests of human rights and political activists appear to be part of a wider strategy to silence critics of the government, and the AU needs to make a strong statement that this is unacceptable to African leadership," said Veronique Aubert, Deputy Programme Director for Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

Amnesty International called on the Zimbabwean authorities to immediately and unconditionally release prisoners of conscience Jestina Mukoko, Broderick Takawira and Pascal Gonzo, and to initiate a prompt, independent and effective investigation into their arbitrary arrest and unlawful detention and claims that Broderick Takawira and Pascal Gonzo were also tortured by members of the security forces.

The three members of the Zimbabwe Peace Project have spent more than a month in custody since their abduction in early December.

"We are concerned about the role being played by various authorities, including the office of the Attorney General, to protect the alleged abductors from being identified and held accountable for the abduction and reported torture of the detainees," said Veronique Aubert.

Amnesty International also called for the dozens of Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) activists who have been held in custody since the end of October 2008 to either be charged and promptly tried in a fair trial or be released immediately. Lawyers of the detainees have repeatedly been denied access to their clients.

"African leaders have squandered numerous opportunities to end the persecution of government critics in Zimbabwe," said Veronique Aubert.

"They continue to be deaf to cries for help and have chosen to be unmoved by ongoing evidence of human suffering in the country – including the appearance in court today of one of the country's strongest voices for human rights."

"The silence of African leaders and their failure to condemn the government's blatant disregard for human rights has significantly contributed to the prolongation of the Zimbabwean human rights crisis."

In the run up to the AU summit, scheduled to take place later this month in Addis Ababa, Amnesty

International called for the AU and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to publicly denounce the persecution of government critics by Zimbabwe's state security agents.

The organisation also called on the AU to deploy human rights monitors in Zimbabwe to investigate all allegations of human rights abuses.

“The Zimbabwean authorities are clearly committing grave human rights violations in an attempt to silence critics and political opponents. The AU should immediately call for an end to human rights violations by the security forces and decide to deploy human rights monitors,” said Veronique Aubert. “Such a measure will go a long way towards preventing further human rights violations and investigate past abuses.”

Notes to editors:

At least 27 people are believed to be in custody following a wave of abductions that started at the end of October 2008. Most of the detainees have been denied access to their lawyers, family and medical treatment for prolonged periods. Zimbabwean authorities have repeatedly failed to comply with court orders to release the detainees and initially denied having taken the detainees.

Jestina Mukoko is the director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP) a leading human rights organisation responsible for monitoring and documenting human rights violations in Zimbabwe. She was abducted by state security agents from her home at around 5.00 am on 3 December 2008. Her whereabouts were unknown until 23 December.

Ms Mukoko was held and interrogated at various unidentified detention facilities following her abduction. Every time she was moved from one facility to another she was blindfolded. Throughout her detention she was in solitary confinement.

During interrogations she was forced to place her feet on the table and was beaten on the soles of her feet with a rubber object. On one occasion, the interrogators spread gravel on the floor, on which she was forced to kneel while the interrogation continued. Throughout her torture, Ms Mukoko vehemently denied interrogators' allegations that she and others were involved in the recruitment of youths to undergo military training to take up arms against the state.

The interrogators also demanded information about her meeting with the Elders – Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, human rights activist Graca Machel and former US President Jimmy Carter. They accused her of being “too influential”.

Broderick Takawira and Pascal Gonzo were abducted from the ZPP offices in the suburb of Mt Pleasant in Harare on 8 December. They were abducted by about six men who forced entry into the organisation's premises.

Others still detained by the Zimbabwean authorities include:

- MDC activists, including 14 adults and a two-year-old baby who were abducted late October and early November 2008 in Mashonaland West and Chitungwiza.
- Mr Gandhi Mudzingwa, former personal assistant to Morgan Tsvangirai, who was abducted in Harare on 8 December.
- Mr Andrison Shadreck Manyere, who was abducted on 13 December in Norton. Mr Manyere is a freelance journalist and a former MDC-T activist.
- Other detainees may be held various detention facilities Harare including police stations.