

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

21 January 2002

AI Index AFR 46/003/2002 - News Service Nr. 12

Zimbabwe: Baseless allegations against civil society are an open invitation to attack them

Baseless allegations against a human rights organization printed in Zimbabwe's state-controlled daily newspaper signal the newest phase in the government's campaign to undermine civil society, Amnesty International said today.

On 17 and 18 January 2002, the Zimbabwe Herald newspaper alleged that Amani Trust has been "funding covert operations against Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF)"; that it is financially linked to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and that its assistance to the victims of political violence is actually a means of carrying out torture.

"This is a contemptible twisting of facts -- to describe an organization assisting victims of torture as perpetrating torture," Amnesty International said. "We unreservedly condemn the campaign of slander that attempts to portray Amani Trust or other human rights organizations as politically motivated and involved in political violence. We are concerned that this gives a green light to state-sponsored militia to perpetrate violence against human rights defenders."

Amani Trust, a leading human rights organization, began operations in 1994, and has worked consistently with victims of torture both from the liberation war before 1980 and victims of the present political violence.

Attacks by the state-controlled media have often led to physical attacks by ruling party supporters or to baseless, politically motivated arrests by the Zimbabwe Republic Police.

For example, state-controlled newspapers, radio and TV have imputed terrorist activities to MDC opposition members, who then became victims of human rights violations, while ZANU-PF members in a majority of cases have been perpetrators.

Amnesty International believes that these Herald articles have created a public perception that heightens the threat of violence by ruling party supporters against the human rights community, in a similar manner in which the MDC and other opposition party activists have been assaulted following articles in the state-run media.

“We are alarmed at the prospect that Amani would be targeted in the same manner as Zimrights -- another leading human rights organization -- and the way the independent press has currently been victimized,” Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International notes that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan’s remarks on 15 January 2002 which expressed concern about stifling of freedoms of assembly, association and expression. It further welcomed UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson’s statement that immediate action is needed in the “real human rights crisis”, with “documented cases of rights abuses against members of opposition groups, the independent media and human rights organizations”.

“Given the level of UN concern, and the commitment undertaken by President Mugabe to undertake full and impartial investigations of allegations of political violence, it is imperative for the president to

extend an invitation to the UN Special Rapporteurs working with Commissioner Mary Robinson to conduct investigations into the freedom of the press, torture, political killings and the independence of the judiciary," Amnesty International said.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>