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Zimbabwe: While African Heads of State meet in Paris, human rights violations against members of civil society continue with impunity

As President Mugabe visits Paris to participate in the Franco-African Summit, Amnesty International is urging French and African heads of state to seize the opportunity to publicly state that they will not tolerate human rights violations in Zimbabwe.

Over the last three years, Zimbabwean government security forces and state-sponsored militia have been responsible for numerous human rights violations, entrenching a pattern of impunity over the past two decades. The ultimate responsibility for the deliberate state-sponsored campaign of harassment and acts of violence, including torture, lies with the Zimbabwean authorities.

"The cycle of harassment, arrest and torture of those who peacefully express their opinion, and those in opposition to the government views, must end. Those responsible for human rights violations and abuse must be brought to justice," the organization said.

Since the beginning of 2003, state repression of human rights defenders and opposition MPs has again escalated, with the sole aim to silence dissent.

On 22 January the Amani Trust, a human rights organization which works with victims of torture, received threats to fire-bomb its offices. The organization had already suspended most of its activities in Zimbabwe because of fears for the safety of its employees.

On 15 January Job Sikhala, Movement for Democratic Change Member of Parliament for St Mary's, also in Harare, Gabriel Shumba, a lawyer with the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, Charles Mutama, Bishop Shumba and Taurai Magaya were arrested by the police on charges of trying to 'subvert a constitutional government'. Medical evidence presented in court on 17 January indicated that the five men had been beaten on the soles of their feet and that Job Sikhala and Gabriel Shumba had been tortured with electricity.

With President Mugabe's presence in Paris, the French government has an opportunity to show its commitment to the *Guidelines to EU policy towards third countries on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and punishment*, which state that "the EU's objective is to influence third countries to take effective measures against torture and ill-treatment and to ensure that the prohibition

against torture and ill-treatment is upheld."

At the level of African regional human rights instruments, Amnesty International underlines that Article 5 of the African Charter to which Zimbabwe is party, prohibits torture, inhumane or degrading punishment or treatment. In addition, the *African Commission Guidelines and Measures for the Prohibition of Torture, Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in Africa* state that there should be no immunity from prosecution for nationals suspected of torture and that those responsible for acts of torture or ill-treatment be subject to legal process.

Amnesty International calls on the African Heads of State and the French government to take all necessary steps to ensure that they and the Zimbabwean authorities live up to their responsibilities under these guidelines.

"African leaders must take a more public stand against state sponsored repression and violence in Zimbabwe. A stronger stand is vital to ending impunity in Zimbabwe and to protecting the human rights of all Zimbabwean citizens," Amnesty International said.

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