

PUBLIC

AI Index: AFR 46/005/2005

UA 77/05

Fear for Safety/Intimidation

01 April 2005

ZIMBABWE

Jenni Williams (f) – women’s activist leader
Magodonga Mahlangu (f) – women’s activist leader
and other members of Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA)

Amnesty International is seriously concerned for the safety of the leaders and members of the grassroots women’s activist group Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA). This follows the arrest of approximately 260 women, some carrying babies, at a peaceful post-election ‘prayer vigil’ in the capital Harare on 31 March. Although all of the women were released the following day, it is the fourth time WOZA activists have been arrested in 2005 and there are fears that further arrests may follow in the coming days and weeks.

On the evening of 31 March, approximately 260 women, including WOZA leaders, Jenni Williams and Magodonga Mahlangu, were arrested at the peaceful ‘prayer vigil’ in Africa Unity Square in the capital, and detained at Harare Central Police Station. It is reported however that not all of the people arrested were taking part in the prayer action. During and after the arrests, several of the women were reportedly beaten. Some were forced to lie on the ground and were beaten on the buttocks by police officers. Others were beaten while trying to get out of police vehicles. Some of the women are reported to be injured, at least three of them seriously. None were given access to adequate medical treatment during their detention.

Approximately ten men, arrested at the same time as the women, were released that same evening without charge. The women however were detained overnight in overcrowded conditions and many were forced to spend the night in an open-air courtyard. The detainees were not given access to lawyers until 1 April. Police reportedly told the women that they could pay a fine if they pleaded guilty to road traffic offences, and would be released. However if the women did not pay the fine, and admit to offences under the Road Traffic Act, they would remain in detention over the weekend until 4 April when the courts re-opened, to face charges under the repressive Public Order and Security Act (POSA). This Act violates internationally recognised human rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly guaranteed under the African Charter and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - to both of which Zimbabwe is a state party. Over the course of 1 April all of the women – several of whom are reported to be elderly, injured or with their children – elected to pay the fines rather than spend the weekend in the cells, during which time they could be subjected to further harassment, threats and poor conditions.

Between February 2003 and March 2005 hundreds of WOZA activists have been arrested by the Zimbabwe police while taking part in peaceful demonstrations to protest the worsening social, economic and human rights situation in the country. WOZA activists have been verbally and physically abused in police custody and denied access to lawyers, food and water. Babies and young children have been detained with their mothers, sometimes overnight in police cells. The repeated pattern of arrest and detention has not deterred the women from organizing their peaceful protests. The leadership of WOZA has often been targeted. For example, on 7 March 2004 Bulawayo police arrested several WOZA leaders – including Magodonga Mahlangu and Jenni Williams – as they left a meeting. They were kept in custody until 9 March, apparently in an attempt to prevent them from organising a WOZA demonstration to mark International Women’s Day on 8 March. When they appeared in court on 23 March, the prosecutor refused to press charges.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing grave concern for the safety and well-being of the members of Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), particularly the group’s leadership, including Jenni Williams and Magodonga Mahlangu;
- calling for the police to stop arresting peaceful protestors and to end their harassment of WOZA activists;

- expressing grave concern at the reports of beatings and ill-treatment by the Zimbabwe Republic Police following the arrest of women for attempting to hold a peaceful post-election 'prayer vigil' on 31 March 2005 in the capital Harare;
- expressing concern at the overcrowded conditions in which those arrested were detained which forced many to spend the night in an open-air courtyard;
- expressing concern at the initial denial of the detainees' access to lawyers and to adequate medical treatment to those reportedly injured during their arrest;
- condemning the attempt by the police to forcibly elicit a plea of guilt under the Road Traffic Act;
- calling for an urgent independent investigation into all allegations of ill-treatment committed by the Zimbabwe Republic Police and for those found guilty to be brought to justice.

APPEALS TO:

Commissioner of the Zimbabwe Republic Police

Commissioner Augustine Chihuri

Police Headquarters

PO Box 8807

Causeway

Harare

Zimbabwe

Fax: + 263 4 253 212

Salutation: Dear Commissioner

COPIES TO:

The Officer Commanding, Harare Central Police Station

The Officer Commanding

Zimbabwe Republic Police

Harare Central District

P.O. Box 8028

Causeway

Harare

Salutation: Dear Sir

The President of the Republic of Zimbabwe

His Excellency The Hon. Robert G. Mugabe

President of the Republic of Zimbabwe

Office of the President

Private Bag 7700

Causeway, Harare

Zimbabwe

Fax: + 263 4 708 211

Salutation: Your Excellency

and to diplomatic representatives of Zimbabwe accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 13 May 2005.