

AI INDEX: AFR 46/08/99
8FEBRUARY 1999

News Service: 029/99

Zimbabwe: government crack-down on civil society

Zimbabwe faces a growing human rights crisis which could seriously impact on its neighbours, Amnesty International said today, appealing to Southern African heads of state to urgently raise the situation with President Robert Mugabe.

“If rule of law is undermined in Zimbabwe, it will have an impact on other Southern African countries,” Amnesty International said.

“We would urge Southern African leaders to speak with their Zimbabwean counterpart to reaffirm the importance of the rule of law, the freedom of the press and the independence of the judiciary.”

In what appears to be a new attack on the freedom of the media, four journalists from an independently owned newspaper were detained on 8 February in connection with an article deemed by the military to put Zimbabwe’s intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in a bad light.

Reporter Grace Kwinjeh and editor Fernando Goncalves were arrested at the offices of the weekly *Zimbabwe Mirror* and later charged under the draconian Law and Order Maintenance Act for allegedly publishing a false report “likely to cause fear, alarm or despondency among the public”.

Former editor Farai Mungazi and publisher Dr Ibbo Mandaza were also later arrested on the same charges. Farai Mungazi and Fernando Goncalves were both released, but Grace Kwinjeh and Dr Ibbo Mandaza remain in police custody on the orders of a senior police official.

Amnesty International believes that the three journalists appear to have been detained for the exercising their right to freedom of expression and they should immediately be released.

The organization fears for the physical safety of the two journalists remaining in custody, in view of the recent arrests and torture of other journalists who had been transferred from police to military custody three weeks ago. Mark Chavunduka and Ray Choto -- two journalists with the independently owned *Zimbabwe Standard* newspaper -- were tortured by electric shocks, beatings and suffocation in water.

Background

Today’s arrest of the four journalists followed President Mugabe’s broadside at civil society delivered in a hour-long televised speech on 6 February 1999. In his speech he verbally attacked

four Supreme Court justices who had asked him to reaffirm commitment to the “rule of law” in Zimbabwe, following military officials’ defiance of three High Court rulings ordering the release of Mark Chavunduka from illegal army detention.

In connection with the alleged torture of Mark Chavunduka and Ray Choto, the four justices asked President Mugabe to confirm that only civilian police can make arrests, to condemn the alleged torture episode and ensure investigations into it, and to reaffirm his confidence in an independent judiciary and police jurisdiction to investigate alleged crimes.

Instead, President Mugabe called upon the Supreme Court justices to resign, attacked white journalists and human rights activists vowing to take “stern measures” against them, and appeared to condone the torture the two journalists at the hands of military interrogators.

In his speech to the nation, President Mugabe said that the judges had no right to give instructions to the President on any matter, and he called upon them to resign and become politicians instead. In a sweeping attack against some white Zimbabweans, President Mugabe named Standard managing director Clive Wilson and Standard publisher Clive Murphy -- along with human rights lawyer David Coltart and Mike Auret, the national director of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace -- as having an "evil" agenda to topple his country's black government. He also criticized the United Kingdom as undermining his legitimate rule.

The president said that "they have pushed our sense of racial tolerance to the limit" and he warned that he would take "very stern measures against them". This appears to be a veiled threat to take extra-legal action against them, since the journalists and human rights activists have committed no recognizable criminal offense in their activities as human rights defenders.

Grace Kwinjeh, Fernando Goncalves, Ferayi Mungazi and Dr Ibbo Mandaza were detained by the Criminal Investigations Division (CID) of the Zimbabwe Republic Police for questioning in connection with an article that appeared in on 30 October 1998. It reported that a Zimbabwean family had received just the head of their son, without a body, after he was killed in action while deployed with the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In the past week, Zimbabwe’s Department of Immigration demanded that all local and foreign journalists working for the international media submit their work permits and passports in what is interpreted as a move to intimidate foreign correspondents. And in recent days, Information Minister Chen Chimutengwende, Home Affairs Minister Dumiso Dabengwa and Minister of State for National Security Sydney Sekeramayi have threatened to create new laws to crack down on the freedom of the independent media.

ENDS.../