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### **Zimbabwe: Citizens' rights not politics, must set the agenda**

*As Zimbabwean authorities continue their crackdown on human rights defenders and non-governmental organizations following the presidential elections, Amnesty International today appealed to the troika of Commonwealth leaders to address human rights concerns in their deliberations.*

*"Addressing human rights concerns in Zimbabwe means immediately disbanding state-sponsored militias, releasing over 100 individuals still in illegal detention, reforming the police to ensure impartiality, and repealing laws which curtail freedom of expression and assembly," Amnesty International urged the presidents of South Africa and Nigeria and the Prime Minister of Australia.*

*"It is important that the Commonwealth leaders work constructively now to find long-term solutions to ending the culture of human rights violations and impunity in Zimbabwe," the organization said.*

*Next week's meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights is the first major opportunity to put forward concrete steps to address these human rights concerns.*

*Amnesty International has received numerous reports of state-sponsored militia groups, which far from being disbanded, have begun a coordinated effort to track down, attack and abduct members of the opposition--many who acted as polling agents during the elections--in Chitungwiza and in six provinces. In Marondera on 15 March, some 20 members of the ZANU-PF affiliated militia beat to death a security*

guard on a farm and seriously injured a commercial farmer. The same militia held and tortured three MDC polling agents on the same day.

A local human rights organization last week described how ZANU-PF affiliated militia operating from 10 bases located around Macheke town in Mashonaland East Province were torturing suspected political opponents. National Youth Service trainees from the Border Gezi Training Centre near Mount Darwin were reportedly assisting in the abduction and beatings.

So far, Zimbabwean human rights groups have recorded 22 torture victims who have sought medical treatment in Harare after being released from illegal detention by these militias operating across the country.

Amnesty International estimates that more than 100 persons remain detained at these bases, with police officers reluctant to intervene to free those being held. In one case, a detainee told the organization of his three-week detention in several camps around Mutoko in Mashonaland East province before being released.

Privately, the police have stated to Zimbabwean human rights activists that they can take no action against the militia and ruling party supporters. However, victims have often reported seeing police officers at the scene of attacks and beatings by militia.

The human rights crisis is being compounded by the threat of famine that has affected parts of the country. Thousands of people may soon be forced to move into neighboring countries. In past circumstances, the government has used control of food aid as a weapon against those perceived to be opponents, and today's press reports

indicate ruling party affiliated militia have taken over food aid distribution in the province of Masvingo.

"The international community, especially Southern Africa countries must recognize that the combination of human rights abuses and the humanitarian crisis threatens not only Zimbabwe , but also the entire region," Amnesty International said.

The solution to Zimbabwe's human rights crisis lies in bringing to justice those who have planned, orchestrated and carried out serious human rights violations, regardless of their high rank or the power they wield.

Putting an end to impunity would be a first step towards restoring public confidence in Zimbabwe's police force and judicial system. Initiating the reforms necessary to bring it back into line with international standards of justice is also vital.

The challenge of overturning years of impunity and carrying out reform necessitates that the international community, especially Southern African countries and the Commonwealth and the UN, support all efforts in putting human rights in Zimbabwe at the top of their agendas for talks with the Zimbabwean government. This includes pressing the government of Zimbabwe to extend an invitation to UN special human rights rapporteurs.

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