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Zimbabwe: Government authorities intensify their campaign to silence dissent

As local council elections approach in September, Amnesty International is deeply concerned that the Zimbabwean authorities are intensifying harassment of human rights organizations, the independent media and the judiciary.

On 29 August, Dr. Frances Lovemore, Medical Director of Amani Trust, a leading human rights NGO in Zimbabwe, was arrested in Harare. Dr. Lovemore was charged with "publishing or communicating false statements prejudicial to the state". The charge apparently stems from recent press reports which referred to Amani Trust's work with victims of torture and politically motivated rape in Zimbabwe. Dr. Lovemore was quoted in the Daily Telegraph (UK) on 25 August 2002 as saying "Mugabe men use rape as revenge". She was released on 30 August, and all charges against her dropped due to insufficient evidence.

"Amnesty International views the arrest of Dr Lovemore as an attempt to intimidate a human rights defender. The international community should take every step to support the work of Zimbabwean human rights NGOs which place themselves at risk in documenting cases of human rights violations and in treating victims".

Also on 29 August, the Harare office of *Voice of the People* (VOP), one of Zimbabwe's two independent broadcasting organizations was bombed in the middle of the night. No one was injured but damage to the building was extensive. No one has claimed official responsibility for the attack. *Voice of the People* has managed to operate despite restrictive media laws passed in 2002, by transmitting to Zimbabwe from the Netherlands via shortwave.

The government has also stepped up its harassment of the judiciary, as witnessed by several recent attacks on magistrates. On 16 August 2002 in the eastern town of Chipinge, Manicaland province, district magistrate Walter Chikwanha was reportedly dragged from his courtroom by suspected war veterans and assaulted at the government complex. No one has been arrested in connection with the attack which is alleged to be in response to Chikwanha's dismissal of an application by the State to remand in custody five MDC officials who along with two others, were accused of burning two government tractors in Chipinge. Following their release, the five were re-arrested, but Chikwanha refused to place them in custody on the basis that the State did not have sufficient evidence to warrant their detention.

Just over a week after the attack on Chikwanha, Godfrey Gwaka, the magistrate for Zaka district, Masvingo province, was stabbed on 26 August at Zaka service centre. It is suspected that the attack is related to recent judgements Gwaka has made on political parties. He is presently receiving medical attention in hospital in Zaka.

"The recent arrest of Dr Lovemore, the bombing of the office of the VOP and the assaults on magistrates is evidence of a clampdown on critics of the government as the September elections draw nearer," Amnesty International said.

"The attacks on the magistrates reflect on-going attempts on the part of government authorities and state sponsored 'militia' to undermine the judicial system and prevent court officials from executing their duties impartially and professionally," the organization added.

Background

Through its work with torture victims, Amani Trust has assisted women who have been raped. The circumstances surrounding these rapes and other sexual assaults indicated that they were politically motivated. Amnesty International, in its report published in June 2002 entitled *ZIMBABWE: The toll of impunity* (AFR 46/034/2002), expressed particular concern at the increasing number of reports of rape and other forms of sexual torture by state-sponsored 'militia'.

The toll of impunity also documented the undermining of the judiciary by the government, which openly defied superior court rulings that contradicted its policy as well as implementing a campaign of harassment of judges who were executing their duties in an impartial and professional manner.

In the report, Amnesty International called for the repeal of those laws such as the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, (AIPPA) which do not conform with international human rights standards. The POSA enacted in January 2002 and the AIPPA, enacted in March 2002, have been used by Zimbabwean authorities to curtail civil liberties, particularly the freedoms of expression and assembly, and create a negative human rights climate.

Public Document

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