

AI Index: PRE 01/076/2012
08 February 2012

Zimbabwe: Release Nine Activists Arrested Following Demonstration By Women of Zimbabwe Arise

Amnesty International today called on the Zimbabwean authorities to immediately and unconditionally release nine members of the activist organization, Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA). The activists, including WOZA leader Jenni Williams, were arrested during a peaceful protest on Tuesday and remain in custody without charge.

The group of seven women and two men, who are members of the sibling organization Men of Zimbabwe Arise (MOZA), were arrested at a demonstration to mark the movement's tenth anniversary and are currently detained at Bulawayo Central Police Station.

Five bystanders, including a pregnant women and a minor, who were also arrested during the peaceful demonstration, are also still in custody. They should also be immediately and unconditionally released.

According to information received by Amnesty International some of those arrested were beaten by police.

The WOZA demonstration took place outside of the offices of the Joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee, (JOMIC), the body tasked with overseeing the implementation of Zimbabwe's Global Political Agreement (GPA), the document which paved the way for the current Government of National Unity.

WOZA leaders Jenni Williams and Magodonga Mahlangu met with representatives of JOMIC on Tuesday afternoon to present concerns about the lack of implementation of the GPA and ongoing human rights abuses. While the meeting was taking place, WOZA members peacefully protested outside the building in support of the leadership's concerns as well as to commemorate the tenth anniversary of WOZA's activities as a social justice movement.

Williams was arrested as she emerged from the meeting, in view of JOMIC representatives, who also witnessed riot police assaulting WOZA demonstrators and members of the public. A total of 14 people including five bystanders were arrested and taken to Bulawayo Central Police Station where they remain in custody.

Last month 17 members of WOZA were arrested at a shopping center in Bulawayo and transferred to Bulawayo Central Police Station where they were threatened and harassed before being released the same day without charge.

'The latest arrests are yet another indication of an alarming up-scale in harassment of WOZA members by security forces. The fact that members of the public were also arrested, reportedly at random, exemplifies the police's flagrant abuse of their power' said Amnesty International's Africa Director, Erwin van der Borgh.

‘That the detainees remain in custody more than 24 hours after they were arrested without charge suggests that the police are struggling to formulate legitimate grounds for the arrest, which is hardly surprising.’ said van der Borgh.

Williams and Magodonga Mahlangu are awaiting a decision by the High Court on the matter of their current trial on spurious charges of ‘kidnapping and theft.. An application was made by the defense to have the case dismissed after key witnesses retracted statements they had originally made to the police. The case is postponed until February 28.

Amnesty International is concerned that recent treatment of WOZA activists by the authorities signifies a deliberate escalation in abuse of the law to facilitate politically motivated arrests and prosecutions. WOZA in particular recently came under increased pressure from elements of the Zimbabwe Republic Police who persistently harass members for exercising their legitimate rights.