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Zimbabwe: Police place human rights under siege

Amnesty International is gravely concerned by the conduct of the Zimbabwe police, who continue to illegally and arbitrarily arrest, harass and ill-treat Zimbabwean citizens as part of a systematic clampdown on freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly.

"Repressive legislation and partisan policing are combining to seriously undermine basic rights in Zimbabwe. Law enforcement officers, who should safeguard the rights of all Zimbabweans, are instead placing those rights under siege," Amnesty International said today.

On 28 April several members of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), a civil society group, were allegedly assaulted by police when they attempted to hold a peaceful demonstration in Harare. The protest was deemed unlawful under repressive legislation enacted in 2002.

On the same day in Bulawayo the Deputy National Chairperson of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association, Mrs. Sheba Phiri, and some NCA activists, were arrested and detained at Bulawayo Central Police station for several hours. They were not charged but told they could be called to answer charges at a later date.

Police also reportedly detained several young people at Mutare railway station, apparently in an effort to prevent them from travelling to Harare to join the demonstration. They were later released without charge.

On 22 April police in Harare brutally assaulted youth activist Tinashe Chimedza. Tinashe, who had been due to speak at a youth forum at Mount Pleasant Hall, Harare, was detained by police officers at the venue. The police reportedly assaulted him with batons, booted feet and open fists. A lawyer called to the scene was initially refused access to Tinashe Chimedza. Tinashe was then arrested, charged with assaulting a police officer, and taken to Marlborough police station. At the police station lawyers representing Tinashe were verbally abused by the police and one lawyer was briefly detained, without charge. Tinashe was later taken to hospital for treatment. He remained in hospital for almost a week.

This is not the first time Tinashe has been assaulted by the police. In 2002 Amnesty International reported on the assault of Tinashe Chimedza by police at Harare Central police station. Since 2001, Tinashe has been arrested at least eight times in his capacity as a student and youth activist.

Amnesty is calling on the Zimbabwe authorities to end the political misuse of the police and ensure that policing in Zimbabwe is professional, impartial and upholds the human rights of all Zimbabweans. "All allegations of human rights violation by police must be investigated and those responsible brought to justice," the organization said.