

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: AFR 36/1235/2019

16 October 2019

Malawi: Escalating crackdown on human rights defenders.

Human rights defenders in Malawi are under increasing threats, harassment, intimidation and attacks from the authorities and ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) cadres. Human rights defenders from the Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC), who organised and led demonstrations against alleged electoral fraud after the May 2019 elections, have been attacked by the ruling party youth cadres, intimidated and are facing trumped up charges. The human rights defenders have been joined by other protesters in calling for the resignation of the Chairperson of the Malawi Electoral Commission, Dr. Jane Ansah and her entire commission on allegations that she fraudulently tampered with the election results in favour of the incumbent President Arthur Peter Mutharika.

In July, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) rights activist and vice chairperson of the HRDC Gift Trapence and Reverend McDonald Sembereka were arrested on charges of fraud connected to a now-resolved funding dispute with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). On 11 July, they were released on bail by a magistrates' court after the UN demanded their release as the issue of misappropriation of funds had been resolved. Amnesty International is concerned they were targeted for prosecution to silence and stop them from organising further demonstrations.

The authorities have failed to promptly, thoroughly and effectively investigate attacks on human rights defenders and activists in Malawi, and to bring suspected perpetrators to justice. On 19 September 2019, the authorities deployed members of the Malawi Defence Forces to quell public protests in Karonga and Mzuzu. About 18 protesters were arrested and detained at the police station. One of the protesters Justin Phiri died on 26 September of infected wounds which were not treated. The soldiers suspected to be responsible for beating Phiri are yet to be arrested.

On 25 September 2019, ruling DPP youth cadres reportedly hacked with machetes human rights activist and protest leader Billy Mayaya. He and four others sustained serious multiple injuries and they are currently receiving treatment. The police joined in by tear-gassing the demonstrators and when some demonstrators sought refuge inside Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital, the police fired teargas inside the hospital. Suspected perpetrators have not been arrested even though the police were present during the attack.

On 1 October 2019, a human rights defender, Jeremiah Gladwell Kaude, was shot with a live bullet at Lilongwe Church of Presbyterian (CCAP) by an armed police officer when police officers fired teargas to disperse peaceful demonstrators. He underwent surgery on the same day and the live bullet was removed from his body at Kamuzu Central Referral hospital.

Timothy Mtambo, Chairperson of the Human Rights Defenders Coalition and Executive Director of the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR), has increasingly been receiving death threats allegedly by ruling party cadres. In 2018, CHRR's offices were petrol-bombed and the security guards were tortured to force them to reveal Mtambo's home address. In 2019 suspected government operatives petrol bombed his residence in Lilongwe and his parents' homestead in Chitipa, destroying household property and a vehicle in the process. On 11 October, Mtambo was shot at six times while driving home from a meeting in Lilongwe at around 11pm. Although he reported the attack at a police station in Lilongwe, Mtambo does not trust that the authorities will offer him any protection or hold suspected perpetrators accountable.

"The current environment has become hostile for human rights defenders in Malawi as they face constant threats, harassment, intimidation and attacks from the authorities and DPP cadres. The Malawian authorities have an obligation to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the human rights of human rights defenders, and to promptly, thoroughly and effectively investigate allegations of attacks against them, as well as bring suspected perpetrators to justice," said Muleya Mwananyanda, Amnesty International Southern Africa Deputy Director.

Amnesty International condemns the intensifying intimidation, harassment, threats and attacks against human rights defenders and activists and calls on the international community to support them and put pressure on the authorities to guarantee the human rights of human rights defenders and activists in the country. The Malawian authorities should put in place effective measures to safeguard the work of human rights defenders. The Malawian authorities are

urged to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

Amnesty International further urges the government of Malawi to conduct prompt, thorough, impartial and effective investigations into the allegations of attacks against Dr. Billy Mayaya, Timothy Mtambo and other human rights defenders and activists. Anyone suspected to be responsible should be brought to justice in fair trials.