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Zimbabwe: Union leader in hiding after police raid

Amnesty International today called on the government of Zimbabwe to end harassment and intimidation of a union activist who is in hiding after police raided a union office in Harare on Wednesday.

Gertrude Hambira, Secretary General of the General Agricultural and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ), fled after five men and one woman who identified themselves as officers from the CID (Criminal Investigation Department) raided the union's head office at about 12:30pm, looking for her.

At the time of the raid Ms Hambira was out of the office. She is now in hiding and in fear for her safety. Staff at the GAPWUZ head office have since received several phone calls asking for details of Ms Hambira's whereabouts.

"The Zimbabwean police must immediately stop the harassment of human rights defenders including Gertrude Hambira," said Veronique Aubert deputy director of Amnesty International's Africa programme.

"These actions are the latest in a series of persistent human rights violations that have continued despite formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) in February 2009."

On Friday 19 February, Gertrude Hambira was called to a meeting at Police Headquarters in Harare with a panel of seventeen high ranking security officials from the Zimbabwe Republic Police, Army, Air force and the Central Intelligence Organisation.

Ms Hambira attended with two colleagues and a lawyer. She was subject to an interrogation about a recent documentary and report published by GAPWUZ which highlight the plight of farm workers in Zimbabwe.

During the interrogation the panel stated that the report and documentary contained very serious allegations for which Ms Hambira should be "behind bars". Ms Hambira and her colleagues were eventually dismissed but the panel warned that they would call on her again.

Gertrude Hambira has previously been the victim of harassment and intimidation as a result of her work to defend human rights, most recently in November 2009 when armed men forced their way into her home. At the time of the attack Ms Hambira was not at home but members of her immediate family were left terrified.

Amnesty International today again called on the GNU to halt on-going harassment of human rights defenders. Persecution of human rights defenders for their legitimate activities is a contravention of Article nine of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

Amnesty International has documented consistent politicised and partisan policing by members of the

Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), in particular the Law and Order section, aimed at silencing the voices of human rights defenders.

GAPWUZ support the rights of farm workers in Zimbabwe, raising their plight at national and international levels. Since 2000 tens of thousands of farm workers have suffered violent attacks and have been displaced from commercial farms.