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African governments must pressure Zimbabwe on human rights

Amnesty International today warned that Zimbabwe is on the brink of sliding back into the post-election violence that marred the country last year, risking undermining the stability brought about by the creation of the unity government in February.

The organization called on Southern African Development Community (SADC) foreign ministers, visiting Zimbabwe on Thursday to assess the eight month-old unity government, not to ignore the worsening human rights situation.

In recent weeks, there have been several arrests of civil society leaders and reports of harassment and intimidation of political opponents by ZANU-PF supporters in rural areas. In particular, Amnesty International has received reports of increased threats of violence in Mashonaland East and Central provinces against known supporters of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) formation led by Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai.

On 25 October, Cephaz Zinhumwe, Executive Director of the National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (NANGO), and Dadirai Chikwengo, NANGO board chairperson, were both arrested by police in Victoria Falls after NANGO convened a workshop for NGO directors.

“Dozens of human rights and MDC activists are on trial for simply exercising their internationally recognized rights, including the rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly and expression. Some of these people were victims of enforced disappearance in 2008,” said Erwin van der Borght, Director of Amnesty International’s Africa Programme

Amnesty International urged the SADC ministers to rethink the role of the Joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee (JOMIC), created under the Global Political Agreement (GPA) establishing the unity government, to ensure the implementation of the agreement, including its human rights aspects.

“JOMIC is ineffective and has fallen victim to political polarisation. It is very weak and is solely dependent on the good will of the feuding parties – a recipe for disaster,” said Erwin van der Borght.

Amnesty International also challenged the SADC and the African Union (AU) to tackle human rights violations by government bodies under the control of ZANU-PF.

“Some elements in the unity government continue to persecute perceived political opponents through unlawful arrests and malicious prosecutions. This is fuelling tension in the unity government and increasing fear amongst the people,” said Erwin van der Borght.

“SADC needs to recognize this recent deterioration in the human rights situation and tackle it immediately – before it degenerates further.”

The organization said that central to addressing the crisis in Zimbabwe was the need to rein in the country’s security agencies and end the culture of impunity for human rights violations. Amnesty International called on the Zimbabwean government to implement institutional reforms, including reforming the country’s security agencies to ensure that they respect and protect human rights of all people in Zimbabwe.