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Zimbabwe: Violence reaches crisis levels; youths forcibly recruited

Amnesty International today warned that the violence in Zimbabwe is reaching crisis levels, and revealed that “war veterans” are forcibly recruiting local youths to attack perceived supporters of the opposition MDC (Movement for Democratic Change).

“Those who refuse to commit violence are assaulted and accused of being MDC supporters by the ‘war veterans’,” said Simeon Mawanza, Amnesty International’s Zimbabwe researcher.

Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International that large numbers of ZANU-PF supporters and “war veterans” are assaulting perceived MDC supporters in Mberengwa district in Midlands province and Mazowe district in Mashonaland Central.

In Mberengwa, a large gang of ZANU-PF supporters -- most of them youths forcibly recruited by “war veterans” -- are going around attacking homes of people suspected of voting for the MDC in the 29 March 2008 elections. A similar gang was reported by an eyewitness in the Chiweshe area in Mazowe district.

Police appear to be unwilling to stop the violence, only acting to arrest MDC supporters suspected of carrying out attacks on perceived ZANU-PF supporters.

“We are particularly worried about people living in more remote rural areas, where violence is taking place away from the spotlight,” said Mawanza. “The situation for these victims of violence is dire. Humanitarian organisations and local non-governmental organisations are being targeted for helping victims, who are being blocked from receiving medical assistance.”

Victims of attacks in rural areas are walking long distances to escape the violence and increasingly seeking refuge in towns and cities.

Some schools in rural areas have been forced to close as teachers perceived to be supporters of the MDC flee from the state-sponsored violence.

Amnesty International fears for the safety of Tonderai Ndira, a supporter of the MDC who was reportedly abducted from his home in Mabvuku, a low income suburb of Harare on 14 May in the early hours of the morning. Reports indicate that nine armed men in plain clothes assaulted him before driving him away while he was still naked in a white Toyota truck. He has not been seen since.

Tonderai Ndira is one of the 32 MDC members who were tortured by state agents while in detention in 2007. He was detained for more than two months in Harare Central Remand Prison before the charges against him were dropped.

Amnesty International has also received a report of the alleged abduction of Sinoia Pfebve (79) and his wife Serena Pfebve (76) on 13 May by people believed to be “war veterans” in the Mukumbura area in Mt. Darwin district, Mashonaland Central province. They are believed to have been taken to Nyakatondo Primary School where the abductors are camped. The Pfebve family have political connections to the MDC: the couple’s son was an MDC candidate in the parliamentary election in 2000 and a by-election in 2001.

At least 22 people have been killed while over 900 have been treated for injuries sustained from the violence since the elections took place. Several hundreds have been hospitalised. Hundreds of families have been forced to flee their homes after they have been burnt by gangs of “war veterans” and ZANU-PF youths.

The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN) reports that its observers have been attacked in Mt. Darwin in Mashonaland Central province. They had their homes vandalised and property looted. Six were hospitalised after sustaining serious injuries. Several families were forced to take shelter in surrounding hills and bushes.

Amnesty International today called on the Zimbabwean government to:

- Publicly denounce all acts of violence by ZANU-PF supporters, “war veterans” and soldiers, as well as by any other party, and work with other political parties to end political violence immediately.
- Ensure that police arrest all suspected perpetrators of human rights abuses, including those who are instigating the violence. Police should operate in a non-partisan manner in executing their duties.
- Ensure that access to humanitarian assistance, including medical care, shelter and food supplies, is not restricted.
- Immediately invite international human rights monitors to investigate the current human rights violations.
- Immediately set up an independent and impartial body to investigate all acts of political violence. The investigation’s findings should be made public. Suspected perpetrators should be brought to justice in proceedings that meet international standards of fairness and victims should be awarded full reparations in accordance with international standards.