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Zimbabwe: Lawyer acquitted but state oppression prevails

The acquittal of key human rights lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa in Zimbabwe is a positive step but exposes how the law has been abused in Zimbabwe to silence human rights defenders, Amnesty International said.

Prominent human rights lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa was yesterday found not guilty of “obstructing the course of justice”.

Beatrice Mtetwa’s acquittal is yet another reminder for the new government to act against police abuse of the law which has tarnished Zimbabwe human rights record.

Arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions and spurious charges have been used systematically as tools to silence individuals and groups working to promote human rights. The new government should demonstrate its commitment to human rights by immediately ordering police to end such abuses.

Beatrice Mtetwa was arrested on 17 March after she demanded police officers show her an official search warrant as they attempted to search one of her clients’ homes in Harare.

If the authorities are truly willing to uphold all the rights in the Declaration of Rights in the Constitution, they must ensure people like Beatrice can do their work freely and enjoy their constitutional right to freedom of expression and association, Amnesty International said.

Lawyers must be allowed to perform all of their professional duties without intimidation, hindrance, harassment and improper interference.

On Friday last week, another human rights activist, Abel Chikomo, was also acquitted. He had been charged in April 2011 with running an ‘illegal’ organisation.

In a new report on Zimbabwe released on Monday to mark 100 days of the new government, Amnesty International called on the authorities to immediately and unconditionally drop all charges against human rights defenders facing prosecution for carrying out their legitimate work to promote and protect human rights.