

MUGABE TURNS SCREW ON RIGHTS ACTIVISTS AND LAWYERS

New wave of repression ahead of second round of leadership contest.

By Jabu Shoko in Harare

President Robert Mugabe is heaping pressure on the country's civil society organisations and the human rights lawyers who represent them ahead of the presidential run-off later this month.

On June 5, Zimbabwe's public service minister Nicholas Goche ordered all non-government organisations, NGOs, to stop their work, saying they had violated certain conditions.

IWPR has been inundated with reports that since the beginning of June, NGOs, have come under siege from marauding state security agents, with more than a dozen raided in the past week or so and scores of officials arrested.

On June 6, armed state security agents stormed the head offices of the Crisis in



Credit: Lazele

MDC secretary general Tendai Biti. Picture taken on April 8; Biti was arrested on June 12.

Security forces raided civil society and Christian coalitions seen as supporting the opposition.

Zimbabwe Coalition, CZC, claiming this umbrella body of hundreds of civil society organisations was running an illegal broadcasting operation — charges that CZC officials vehemently deny.

NEWS IN BRIEF

- President Robert Mugabe says “we will not hesitate to arrest” leaders of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change. In a speech on June 16, he claimed the MDC was behind the wave of election violence that has hit Zimbabwe. The MDC says irregular militias loyal to Mugabe and the security forces are engaged in a concerted campaign of intimidation and violence to destroy opposition support ahead of the June 27 presidential election.
- A day earlier, Mugabe was quoted as saying he would be willing to hand over to someone from ZANU-PF once he was sure the country was safe from “sellouts” and foreign interference.
- MDC secretary general Tendai Biti has been charged with treason after being arrested on arrival at Harare Airport last week.
- South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu has given an interview in which he criticised President Thabo Mbeki for keeping silent over the Zimbabwe crisis.
- British prime minister Gordon Brown has criticised the repeated arrest of MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai and accused President Robert Mugabe of attempting to steal the election.
- United Nations assistant secretary general for political affairs, Haile Menkerios, is to hold talks in Zimbabwe this week. Meanwhile, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said in London, “Anyone who tries to come into power through fraudulent elections will have a price to pay. I think the people of Zimbabwe will not accept it and the international community will not accept him either.”

Three days later, heavily armed riot police, national intelligence officers and military forces raided the offices of the Ecumenical Centre. This religious complex houses the offices of the Student Christian Movement of Zimbabwe, Ecumenical Support Services, the Christian Alliance, the Zimbabwe National Pastors' Conference and the Padare Men's Forum on Gender.

According to officials from the respective organisations, the state security agents carted away documents, computers, laptops and hard drives before arresting some 15 people, including interns and newspaper columnist Pius Wakatama.

“It is a deliberate crackdown on civil society organisations” — Useni Sibanda of the Christian Alliance.

“I am shocked they are doing this to Christian organisations,” said Useni Sibanda, the coordinator of Christian Alliance.

“It is a deliberate crackdown on civil society organisations. This election is going to be far from free and fair with this violence.”

A day earlier, in the remote town of Binga in Matabeleland North, an undisputed rural stronghold of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, state security agents arrested 14 members of groups organised by the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe, MMPZ.

Meanwhile, two prominent human rights lawyers have fled to South Africa after receiving threats to their lives, according to Irene Petras, director of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, ZLHR. Another human rights lawyer is living in fear after representing MDC officials and other clients perceived to be allies of the opposition.

On May 30, the Southern Africa Litigation Centre and its network partners advised ZLHR that it had received Andrew Makoni in its offices in Johannesburg.

Makoni had acted for a wide range of human rights defenders, with his work with MDC leaders and members forming the backbone of his legal practice.

He had fled the country after receiving credible information that he was on a list of human rights lawyers targeted for imminent assassination for representing MDC members. This information has allegedly been independently verified from two separate sources who spoke two other lawyers, and has also been publicised by the African Bar Association.

Makoni and other human rights lawyers were reportedly to be “made an example of” to dissuade anyone else from taking up the defence of targeted human rights defenders in the run-up to the presidential election, and in the face of escalating human rights violations in several provinces, according to information obtained from ZLHR.

Harrison Nkomo, a human rights lawyer with ZLHR who has represented media practitioners, and members of the MDC, has also fled the country after receiving the same information, and believing his life to be under threat.

On June 9, ZLHR was advised that a group had gathered around the vehicle of lawyer Alec Muchadehama outside his legal practice in Harare and was waiting for him to emerge from his office. Vehicles were parked at the exits of the building as well as outside his home. Realising that these were not ordinary police officers sent to arrest him, the lawyer immediately fled and is now in hiding.

He, too, has represented a significant number of human rights defenders, including MDC leaders and members, and a number of NGOs, such as the National Constitutional Assembly, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions and the Christian Alliance.

“These are the most recent examples of a deeply disturbing clampdown on the legal profession, but are not the only cases to have been reported recently to ZLHR,” said Petras.

“Lawyers [are] reported to have alleged that ‘mass arrests’ are being planned in the final weeks before the election run-off, and that human rights lawyers are considered a barrier to ensuring that targeted individuals remain in custody while the election is ongoing.”

“Human rights lawyers are considered a barrier to ensuring that targeted individuals remain in custody while the election is ongoing” — Irene Petras of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights.

Petras said ZLHR wished to warn of the dire consequences facing human rights defenders, civic organisations and political party leaders and members as a result of the official clampdown.

“Such targeting of lawyers — even the mere allegation that there exists a list of lawyers for elimination — has a chilling effect on all members of the legal profession and, by implication, on the affected individuals whose rights they seek to protect,” she said.

Petras urged human rights lawyers to exercise caution in relation to their security, and to immediately report all threats and attacks to the responsible authorities, to the Law Society of Zimbabwe and to ZLHR, as well as to Southern African Development Community, SADC, diplomatic representatives and regional observers in Zimbabwe.

The crackdown on lawyers and Christian organisations comes hard

on the heels of a government directive banning humanitarian organisations from distributing food in the country.

Nicholas Goche, the minister of public services, labour and social welfare, claimed the decision to bar the relief agencies from distributing food was arrived at after ZANU-PF discovered that the “food was being used to campaign for the MDC”.

Meanwhile, the MDC continues to be subjected to government pressure.

MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai claimed at a media briefing on June 10 that at least 66 of his party’s supporters had been killed in election violence.

The MDC leader has been picked up several times since his return to Zimbabwe, and the party’s secretary-general Tendai Biti was arrested minutes after he set foot on the tarmac at Harare Airport on June 12.

Eric Matinenga, an MDC legislator-designate for Buhera West, was last week arrested for the second time in as many days. The authorities have ignored a high court order obtained by his lawyers ordering his release.

Minister of justice, legal and parliamentary affairs Patrick Chinamasa said on June 10 that he was easing pressure on jails ahead of the June 27 presidential run-off by releasing petty criminals to create room for people arrested for politically motivated crimes.

There is a fear some civil society representatives will be locked up on trumped-up charges.

MDC insiders claim Tsvangirai, who beat Mugabe but failed to secure an absolute majority in the disputed March 29 election, is under pressure to forge a government of national unity with the incumbent, in a bid to stem the surging violence.

Jabu Shoko is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

FEARS NGO CRACKDOWN MAY THREATEN MILLIONS



Credit: Lazele

People receiving food aid from an NGO in Harare. Picture taken in August 2007.

United Nations officials warn ban on NGOs tantamount to human rights abuse.

By Yamikani Mwando in Bulawayo

Jason Mthombeni’s 77-year-old mother has been hungry for years — now she is likely to starve.

She is one of the millions of Zimbabweans who will suffer as a result of President Robert Mugabe’s ban on the activities of aid agencies in the country, imposed after he accused them of supporting the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

“You should come and see her some time. I have never seen such cruelty. She always talks about being hungry, but I cannot do much with the kind of money I make,” said Mthombeni of the woman he calls “Uسالukazi”, which means old woman in the local Sindebele language.

Zimbabwe’s public services minister Nicholas Goche ordered all NGOs to suspend their field operations on June 5, accusing them of violating the conditions under which they work, but offered no further explanation.

The directive has been slammed by human rights groups, who say that humanitarian aid for the most poor and vulnerable in society will now be severely restricted.

Decision to ban aid groups from working in the field meets with severe criticism.

The relief provided by such groups had been keeping many Zimbabweans alive, since the government’s so-called land reform policies of eight years ago left the former breadbasket of Africa a non-productive wreck.

A crackdown on aid agencies first began after Mugabe's popularity began to dwindle as a result of skewed economic policies which pushed the country into recession.

In the volatile area of Matabeleland, a province in western Zimbabwe and an opposition stronghold, all aid agencies were driven out after war veterans accused them of working with the MDC to destabilise the country.

Mthombeni, who is 33, and married with two children, sells sweets in the central district of Bulawayo, the former capital of Matabeleland. He plays cat and mouse with council police and members of the national police force who accuse vendors like him of operating illegally.

He does not know whether he or any of his peers will reach their seventies in a country where, according to the World Health Organisation, WHO, life expectancy has dropped by more than half since independence.

Mthombeni's mother lives with her grandchildren in Nyamandlovu, a poor resettlement area about 60 kilometres west of Bulawayo. It is now home to hundreds of veterans of Zimbabwe's liberation war, who took over productive cattle ranches and farms from white commercial farmers during violent farm invasions in 2000. The land now lies fallow.

Mthombeni says his mother's plight highlights the acute needs of rural communities, which have relied for years on the aid provided by humanitarian agencies. For her and for many like her, the past weeks have been particularly difficult.

When he first came to power after Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain in 1980, Mugabe pledged to work with the many aid agencies which gravitated to Zimbabwe, anxious to assist what was then seen as Africa's most promising democracy.

The then prime minister identified NGOs as crucial partners in

developing and bettering the lives of both urban and rural communities.

A Time magazine story dated September 8, 1980, entitled Mugabe Pleads for Aid, reports that he called for international assistance to help rehabilitate the country, which was suffering the ravages of years of war.

Mugabe received international praise for his impressive strides towards making food, health and education available to all. The rallying cry then was, "Food for all by the year 2000, health for all by the year 2000", and much of this was to be realised through strategic partnerships the government entered into with NGOs.

Life expectancy has dropped by more than half since independence.

Over the years, Mugabe has fallen out with his development partners, often accusing them of trying to work against him. He now insists — despite all the evidence to the contrary — that the country has sufficient resources.

Addressing the recent United Nations Food Summit in Rome, Mugabe blamed the country's food woes on a hostile bid by NGOs working with his arch-enemies the UK and America, to effect what he terms "illegal regime change".

The situation in the country continues to deteriorate, making the ban on humanitarian assistance particularly tragic.

According to projections by the UN's World Food Programme, this year has seen an increase in the number of Zimbabweans who will need food assistance from four million to at least half the population, currently estimated at more than 12 million.

Another food security watchdog, the Famine Early Warning Systems

Network, FEWS, last week added its voice to growing international concern, warning the ban on NGOs had exacerbated the food problem to create conditions not seen in the country for more than a decade.

There are also fears of an upsurge in infant mortality, as many rural breastfeeding mothers have relied on NGOs for supplementary feeding after failing to secure adequate care from government health institutions.

Many NGOs are now closing shop.

"We are streamlining our staff after the call by government for us to stop working," a priest working for the Catholic Development Commission, CADEC, told IWPR.

The faith-based NGO was involved in assisting rural communities in the two Matabeleland provinces with everything from food to sourcing antiretroviral drugs for HIV/AIDS sufferers.

"We don't know what will become of these people," said the priest, one of the few remaining missionaries who offered hope to starving millions across the country.

The United Nations country team in Zimbabwe last week warned that the ban on NGOs was tantamount to a human rights abuse, creating life-threatening conditions for millions who are in dire need of food aid.

Before the ban, the acute food crisis had seen urban populations previously unaffected by food shortages lining up for handouts from NGOs, like World Vision and Christian Care.

"This is as bad as it gets," a field officer with World Vision in Bulawayo told IWPR.

"We were feeding schoolchildren and grandmothers, society's most vulnerable groups, but now we can only guess how they are supposed to survive."

Yamikani Mwando is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

WOMEN TRADE SEX FOR FOOD

As inflation continues to soar, increasing numbers of women turn to sex industry to survive.

By Nonthando Bhebhe in Harare

Everything seems to be crumbling in Portia Ruredzo's world. Unable to afford food and rent, she says she has been left with little choice but to turn tricks to feed her two children.

The young single mother of two can barely make ends meet on her paltry monthly salary, which is now equivalent to ten loaves of bread on the black market, where most Zimbabweans get scarce commodities.

Battling to survive the world's highest inflation rate — which was estimated to have reached 1.7 million per cent in May — Portia has resorted to prostitution, although she does not describe her activities as such.

Years ago, she used to boast of her monogamous relationship and swore never to date married men. Yet now she is having sex with whoever will buy her groceries, pay her rent and supplement her salary.

Unlike the hookers who gather on street corners at night, Portia preys on the city's well-heeled men.

She meets them in expensive restaurants and the other haunts of the rich.

When they express an interest in her, she swaps numbers with them, and then sends a text message asking them first to buy a few groceries when they visit. Later on, she asks them to provide her with money for rent. To ensure the money keeps flowing, she sleeps with them.

IWPR visited Portia at her two-roomed cottage where her rent is nearly four times her monthly salary.



Credit: Lazele

Aids counselling NGO exhibit at an event in Harare. Picture from September 2007

"We are the have-nothings and if I don't get money from my boyfriends, we would starve and I would be homeless and sleeping on the streets. I have no choice, my dear," she said.

"If I don't get money from my boyfriends, we would starve" — Portia, Harare resident.

Yet she denies that she is a sex worker.

"This does not make me a prostitute because you don't see me soliciting for sex on the streets or in bars. I just have many boyfriends who help me financially," she said.

"I am not a run-off-the-mill prostitute like the others."

When asked how many men she sleeps with in a week, Portia said between five and eight.

Portia, like so many other Zimbabweans, struggles to pay for basic commodities, which tend to be imported from South Africa, Mozambique and Botswana, and are normally only available on the black market,

"At least I am still young and I can use my sexuality to get money or whatever I can from men," she said.

It is thought that thousands of other young, impoverished Zimbabwean women now provide sex in exchange for food, shelter and clothing.

While some have resorted to prostitution, others have become what are commonly referred to as "small houses" — a Zimbabwean expression describing a mistress or an extramarital affair.

Under this arrangement, the man pays for some of the woman's living expenses. Yet while a small house may be essentially exchanging sex for money or a certain lifestyle, the woman is classed as a mistress rather than a prostitute, provided she keeps to one man. Cheating is not an option for a "well-kept woman" as she would risk losing everything.

Martha is in her twenties and should be lining up suitors for marriage, but she prefers being mistress to a 61-year-old government minister.

"Times are different from the 1980s or 1990s, when I would ideally be dating much younger men in their twenties or early thirties," she said.

"I can't provide for myself, so I have to look for a wealthy man" — Martha, mistress of a government minister.

"This year, particularly, is the year for survival of the fittest. I can't provide for myself, so I have to look for a wealthy man — I don't want a young man with nothing."

As part of the deal, she has to make sure that she is always available for her lover's sexual pleasure.

But at what price? She confessed to IWPR that she is having unprotected sex and neither she nor her lover had taken an HIV test.

One fifth of Zimbabwe's adult population has HIV and an estimated 565 adults and children become infected every day. The country is experiencing one of the harshest AIDS epidemics in the world.

Asked whether she worried about the health risks, Martha said that having to endure severe poverty was just as life threatening.

"At least for now I can live like a queen and acquire as much as I can when I have this opportunity," she said.

Unlike Martha, whose rich boyfriend can provide everything, Rita Biza is mistress to two married men.

Rita said one of them pays rent for her two-bedroom apartment in the affluent Avenues district, while the other provides her and her parents with food.

Rita said she has no choice but to continue seeing her two married

lovers. "My salary just went up yet it does not come close to meeting my needs. If I could get a single rich guy or just an ordinary guy that could take care of my rent, food and general upkeep, I would dump my two married men," said the young woman.

Women exposed to high risk of HIV infection.

Like Martha, she is also risking her health with unprotected sex.

"I don't use condoms. This is not because I don't want to, but because they give me so much money. That is what they are paying for," she said.

(Names in this report have been changed to protect the identities of the women.)

Nonthando Bhebhe is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

The Zimbabwe Crisis Report is an initiative of IWPR-Africa's Zimbabwe Programme. This programme promotes democratization and good governance with Southern Africa and contributes to the development of a culture of human rights and the rule of law. Focusing on Zimbabwe the programme has three core components —

information provision, capacity building and dissemination and distribution.

The key purpose is to increase awareness in the Southern African region of the Zimbabwean situation and the implications for regional peace, security and economic development.

It also contributes to the development of regional policy, promotes dialogue and builds bridges within the region. It also raises the Africa wide and international profile of Zimbabwe in the context of the region. Importantly it also builds the skills and capacity of the media to reliably and accurately report political transition, governance and human rights issues.

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