

5.22 Zimbabwe

Introduction

Conditions in Zimbabwe have deteriorated since 2006, with a marked escalation in the use of intimidation and violence. The collapse of the formal economy has led to increased food insecurity, limited access to electricity and water, and severe difficulty in obtaining affordable medical treatment. As a result, thousands of Zimbabweans are fleeing over the borders, mainly to South Africa.

Human rights violations perpetrated by state agents, including assault, torture and illegal detentions, have been sustained. The rule of law has deteriorated, with violations frequently going unpunished and even endorsed by the government of Zimbabwe in public statements. Democratic space has been severely restricted, and basic human rights such as freedom of expression, assembly and association systematically dismantled.

Recent developments

March 2007 violence

On 11 March 2007, police prevented a peaceful prayer meeting in the Highfield area of Harare from taking place, violently assaulting and detaining a number of opposition members, journalists, students and human rights defenders who were due to participate. A member of the National Constitutional Assembly, Gift Tandare, was shot dead. The leader of the opposition group, the Movement for Democratic Change, Morgan Tsvangirai, and others were severely beaten.

Of course he [opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai] was bashed. He deserved it... I told the police beat him a lot. He and his MDC must stop their terrorist activities. We are saying to him, 'Stop it now or you will regret it.'

– President Robert Mugabe, addressing a ZANU PF (ruling party) rally on 29 March 2007 (Human Rights Watch, *Bashing dissent*, 2 May 2007)

Police raided a press conference called by the Movement for Democratic Change on 28 March 2007. Documents and computers were removed and staff arrested, including Morgan Tsvangirai.



Zimbabwean opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai in bed at a local hospital in Harare.

Police denied access to legal representation for those detained, saying that "lawyers are not welcome here". Activists were held in detention for up to four months, until the state's case finally collapsed.

These events provoked widespread condemnation from the UK and many others in the international community.

Continuing the pattern of violence

Despite this criticism, the government of Zimbabwe has continued and escalated its pattern of violence. The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (a coalition comprising 17 Zimbabwean non-governmental organisations (NGOs)) reported that there were more human rights violations recorded in the first half of 2007 than in the whole of 2006.

On 8 May 2007, riot police assaulted lawyers, including the president of the Law Society, when they were attempting to present a petition on the arbitrary arrest of two human rights lawyers. Lawyers are routinely obstructed in their work and denied access to their clients, and are often themselves subjected to harassment and intimidation. The independence of the judiciary is severely compromised, and the police have increasingly defied court rulings.

On 25 July, riot police disrupted a number of peaceful gatherings across Zimbabwe by members of the National Constitutional Assembly. Police targeted 243 people, including the elderly, and the beatings were particularly brutal and

wide-ranging, with one member (Bronislawa Kwinjo) dying as a result of complications from her injuries. Demonstrations by organisations such as the National Constitutional Assembly, Women of Zimbabwe Arise and the Zimbabwe National Students Union continue to be regularly dissolved by use of force. Activists from the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions have been targeted and severely assaulted. NGO meetings, workshops and even food distributions are regularly obstructed and human rights defenders arrested and harassed.

Current concerns

Conditions in the country

Conditions in Zimbabwe are dire and continue to deteriorate, not least due to disastrous government policies such as the price controls. The reality of life in Zimbabwe is struggle for access to food, fuel and water. The facts on this are stark and undeniable:

- Life expectancy is the lowest in the world.
- Zimbabwe has the world's highest rate of orphans.
- More than 3,000 people per week are dying from AIDS-related illnesses.
- Although there are few reliable figures, it is estimated that between 3 and 4 million people have left Zimbabwe.
- Over 80 per cent of the population is unemployed.
- Over 4 million people will need food aid between September 2007 and the next harvest, expected around April 2008.

2008 elections

The UK and the wider international community have maintained the need for free and fair elections to be held in Zimbabwe. The government of Zimbabwe has not yet addressed critical elements such as an end to political violence, access to the media for opposition parties, accurate voters' rolls, fair constituency boundaries, allowing civic education and an independent electoral court. In fact, amendment 18 to the constitution makes a number of retrogressive changes to the electoral framework.

Over the past year, the UK has given full support to the Southern Africa Development Community mediation process between the political parties as taken forward by President Mbeki. Sadly, in spite of his efforts, the political violence has continued and very little has changed on the ground. The widespread and indiscriminate arrests, as well as unlawful detention and torture of individuals, have undermined the ability of the Movement for Democratic Change to operate as an effective opposition party. The playing field for elections is tilted in favour of President Mugabe's ZANU PF party and conditions are far from allowing the March elections to be free and fair. It is feared that the number of violations may increase in the run-up to March.

Freedom of expression

In a statement released in April, the Media Institute of Southern Africa expressed serious concern about reports of abductions, beatings and torture of journalists in the country (Human Rights Watch, *Bashing dissent*). The passing of the Interception of Communications Bill could make journalists and other NGOs even more vulnerable. The government uses the repressive legislative framework to prosecute journalists and others for writing "falsehoods" or criticising the president.

Media freedom is very limited in Zimbabwe, with only a couple of expensive, weekly independent newspapers remaining. Independent radio stations exist, broadcasting from outside the country, but are subject to regular jamming by the state.

UK action

The UK closely monitors and takes action on the repeated human rights violations in Zimbabwe. Along with EU partners, we have raised our concerns with the government of Zimbabwe and other governments in the Southern Africa Development Community region, stressing that democracy, sustainable development and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms should be interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Following the 11 March incident, the UK and EU issued statements condemning the government's actions and we summoned the Zimbabwean ambassador to provide an explanation for the events. After the repression of National Constitutional Assembly demonstrators, the EU made a démarche to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

expressing concern about the continuous intimidation of and violence against human rights defenders and civil society.

Internationally, the UK pressed for a strong EU statement at the UN Human Rights Council expressing deep concern at the situation in Zimbabwe and this was delivered on 28 March 2007 and supported by over 50 countries. The March 2007 Human Rights Council was the first at which African countries also highlighted their concern about human rights in Zimbabwe, with both Ghana and South Africa making statements. The EU and the UK raised Zimbabwe at the June and September sessions of the Council. The UK also raised the worsening humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe during the UN Security Council sessions in March and September 2007. Together with the EU, the UK has a regular dialogue with countries in the region about the human rights situation in Zimbabwe, including the prospects that the 2008 elections can be held in accordance with international standards.

The UK actively participates in implementation of the EU Human Rights Defenders Strategy in Zimbabwe. This includes regular contact with human rights defenders and other support, such as visits to victims in hospitals. British Embassy staff are present at key court cases to observe proceedings and maintain a record of the results, as well as to maintain pressure for the court system to uphold the rule of law. In addition, we have been active in providing substantial financial support to civil society organisations in Zimbabwe, working to mitigate state oppression and to preserve democratic space. We have also funded NGO advocacy to international bodies such as the African Commission on Human and People's Rights and the UN Human Rights Council.

Humanitarian aid

The UK remains committed to supporting the people of Zimbabwe and is one of the three largest donors of humanitarian assistance, with an annual spend of between £30 and £40 million over the last five years. The focus of support remains on HIV and AIDS and humanitarian assistance. The Department for International Development (DfID) is responding to the acute humanitarian crisis of food security through an £8 million commitment to the World Food Programme and a £5 million three-year commitment for mobile and vulnerable populations, including those forcibly displaced and

facing abuse crossing into neighbouring countries. DfID funding is also expanding access to HIV treatment through the Multi-donor Expanded Support programme and reducing the vulnerability of orphans and vulnerable children. The much-acclaimed DfID-funded Protracted Relief programme (£50 million over five years) is providing support to 1.5 million of Zimbabwe's poorest with agricultural inputs, clean water and care for the chronically ill. Particular attention is paid to improving the targeting of those who most need the support, for instance enhancing the World Food Programme's monitoring in the run-up to the 2008 elections. All funding is channelled through NGOs and UN agencies, including the International Organization for Migration, UNICEF, the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS and the World Food Programme. This ensures that assistance reaches those who need it most.

Forward look

We will continue to work with international partners, including the EU and UN, as well as with a growing number of African states committed to the principles of democracy, good governance and human rights, to press for reform in Zimbabwe. The current situation is unsustainable. Economic decline is fuelling a growing humanitarian and wider human rights crisis. Elections in 2008 provide an opportunity for change, but only if conditions on the ground improve, allowing all parties to participate and all Zimbabwean citizens, including those in the significant diaspora, to cast their vote freely.