



JANUARY 2007

COUNTRY SUMMARY

## Zimbabwe

Human rights violations in Zimbabwe continued unabated in 2006. President Robert Mugabe's government maintained its assault on the media, the political opposition, civil society activists, and human rights defenders. Police and state agents continue to arbitrarily arrest and detain peaceful activists, and the latter half of the year saw a marked increase in reports of torture and ill-treatment of government critics while in detention.

More than a year after the government's program of mass evictions and demolitions—Operation Murambatsvina—tens of thousands of people continue to suffer the catastrophic consequences. Despite numerous public statements from the government that it would initiate a reconstruction program to address the homelessness created by the evictions, few of the people displaced by the evictions have received housing and many remain in need of food, water, and other forms of assistance. In addition, the government has repeatedly hindered efforts by the United Nations to provide emergency shelter and has subjected many of the victims to repeated forced evictions.

The humanitarian situation of the evictees and the HIV/AIDS situation are among problems that are being exacerbated by acute food shortages in the country. Food security is likely to remain precarious for many vulnerable groups.

### Freedom of Assembly

Peaceful protests in Zimbabwe are often violently disrupted by the police. At various times in 2006 hundreds of peaceful demonstrators including student activists, trade unionists, and human rights activists were arrested. On several occasions, protestors were forced to lie down and were brutally beaten by police with batons before their arrest. On September 25, for example, police violently disrupted a peaceful march by some 500 activists from the National Constitutional Assembly in Harare. Riot police armed with batons stopped the march, asked the activists to sit down and proceeded to beat them one at a time with batons before ordering them to leave. During the beatings

a number of people panicked, leading to a stampede that injured about 24 people, seven seriously.

The government has used repressive legislation to systematically deny activists their right to peacefully assemble and associate. For example, most of the activists arrested in 2006 were charged with violating the Public Order and Security Act (POSA), which gives police wide powers regulating public gatherings, and is also loosely interpreted by police. Tellingly, in many of the cases the charges were later dropped and those arrested released without charge.

### **Freedom of Expression and Information**

The government launched a new assault on the country's remaining independent press through a wave of criminal prosecutions and arrests. On January 24, 2006, the authorities brought charges of operating a broadcasting service without a license against six trustees and three employees of the privately owned radio station Voice of the People. The charges were subsequently dismissed by the High Court. In the same month, the government-appointed Media and Information Commission (MIC) threatened to cancel the license of the Financial Gazette, a privately-owned newspaper, if it did not retract a story that questioned the commission's independence. On January 29 the MIC refused to renew the accreditation of 15 journalists working for the Zimbabwe Independent, another privately-owned newspaper, until the paper retracted a similar story.

Despite condemnation from civil society, in July the government introduced in Parliament the Interception of Communications Bill, which seeks to give extraordinary powers to Zimbabwe's Central Intelligence Organization, the Commissioner of Police, and the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority to intercept citizens' phone calls and emails without credible safeguards. The bill is currently under review by the parliamentary Legal Committee. The Suppression of Foreign and International Terrorism Bill, gazetted in March but withdrawn after the parliamentary Legal Committee found some provisions to be unconstitutional (and pending resubmission with revisions at this writing), has raised fears similar to those arising from the Interception of Communications Bill about its potential use in silencing government critics.

## **Torture and Ill-Treatment in Detention**

Torture and ill-treatment in Zimbabwe's police cells is rife. The government has taken no clear action to halt the rising incidence of torture and ill-treatment of opposition supporters and civil society activists while in the custody of the police or intelligence services.

In a shocking example of police torture and ill treatment, 15 members of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions were arrested and brutally assaulted by police at Matapi police station following peaceful protests on September 13 against poor working conditions. The unionists reported that a group of five police officers beat them with fists and batons, kicked them, banged their heads against the wall, and verbally abused and threatened them. They were initially denied medical treatment and access to their lawyers for 24 hours but were later taken to a hospital where some were found to have serious injuries such as fractured limbs. The High Court in Harare ordered an immediate investigation, but at this writing it was unclear whether the police would comply. After the incident President Mugabe expressed approval for the actions of the police, stating that those who protested in the street deserved to be "thoroughly beaten."

The authorities have also targeted student activists and in some cases subjected them to police torture and ill-treatment while in custody. In May 2006 the authorities reacted to a spate of student protests against unpopular government policies with mass arrests and violence. For example, on May 29 police arrested student leader Promise Mkwanazi and detained him at a police station in the northeastern town of Bindura for five days without charge. Each night a group of three or four policemen stripped Mkwanazi naked, shackled him with his hands between his legs so he could not move, and beat him severely with batons; they also threatened to kill him. They accused him of belonging to the opposition and of trying to overthrow the government.

## **Human Rights Defenders**

The authorities intensified their attacks on human rights defenders and lawyers in an attempt to silence their condemnation of the government's poor human rights record. Government officials routinely accuse human rights groups of being supporters of the opposition and of receiving funds from western donors whom the government accuses of trying to destabilize the country. Human rights defenders and lawyers are constantly subjected to harassment, arbitrary arrests, and attacks by the police,

intelligence agents and government officials. In May two human rights lawyers from the organization Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights were threatened by supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF party and state agents when they attempted to represent students arrested by the police for protesting the high cost of student fees.

Hundreds of members of the women's organization Women of Zimbabwe Arise were arrested throughout the country in 2006 during peaceful protests against the worsening social, economic, and human rights situation. Scores of the organization's members were subjected to ill-treatment while in custody.

## **HIV/AIDS**

Although the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate has dropped, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Zimbabwe remains critical. The government's abusive practices such as Operation Murambatsvina as well as inadequate health and social welfare policies have contributed to the denial of access to healthcare for hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans living with HIV/AIDS: some 350,000 of the 1.6 million people carrying the virus are in immediate need of life-saving antiretroviral drugs and another 600,000 are in need of care and support. Such policies and practices risk undermining the progress that the government has achieved thus far in addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis.

## **Key International Actors**

President Mugabe has persistently responded with defiance and at times contempt to attempts to address Zimbabwe's interrelated political, human rights, and humanitarian crises by international partners such as South Africa and other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. There is little consensus internationally about the way forward in dealing with the crises. The South African government remains firmly entrenched in its position of quiet diplomacy, while European Union member states and the United States have maintained targeted sanctions against government officials but have done little else.

Recent attempts to solve the political crisis in Zimbabwe by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and SADC member countries have largely failed. A planned visit by Annan in January 2006 to investigate the situation in the aftermath of the evictions did not take

place. Instead, at the July summit of the African Union Annan was forced to step aside and allow former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa to deal with the crisis, at Mugabe's insistence. Little clarity exists about what form Mkapa's efforts will take. Zimbabwe's humanitarian crisis has been worsened by the reluctance of western donors to provide direct humanitarian assistance to the government of Zimbabwe. More worryingly, donors have failed to heed calls for further funding of UN humanitarian assistance programs. For example, in October 2006 the World Food Programme declared that it was cutting food aid to Zimbabwe by two-thirds because funding for food assistance to Zimbabwe was running out.