

COMMISSIONS WATCH

[17th August 2019]

Statement by Spokesperson for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on 16th August 2019 Demonstrations in Harare

BRIEFING NOTES



Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights:
Rupert Colville

Location: Geneva

Date: 16 August 2019

Zimbabwe

We understand that today's planned protests in Harare have just been called off by the organisers, following a High Court decision to uphold a Government ban. The crowds that had already gathered were dispersed by police, with reports emerging of the use of force against protestors.

With opposition demonstrations still likely to take place in Zimbabwe in the near future, we urge the Government to find ways to continuously engage with the population about their legitimate grievances on the economic situation, and to stop cracking down on peaceful protestors. If demonstrations go ahead we urge the security forces and protesters to ensure they proceed calmly and without any violence.

We are deeply concerned by the socio-economic crisis that continues to unfold in Zimbabwe. While acknowledging efforts made by the Government, the international community and the UN in Zimbabwe to mitigate the effects of the crisis and reform process, the dire economic situation is now impacting negatively on the realization of the economic and social rights of millions of Zimbabweans.

Long-term neglect and structural deficiencies have contributed to hyperinflation, resulting in soaring prices for fuel, food, transport and health services, which is having a dramatic impact on the population, and particularly on marginalized working-class people. The fact that key commodities and services have become less affordable for poor families, means there is an increasing need for strong social protection measures.

The economic crisis is converging with the impact of cyclone Idai that hit Zimbabwe last March, as well as the El Niño-induced drought, to create a rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation, with the result that around five million Zimbabweans, or one third of the total population of 16 million people, are now estimated to be in need of humanitarian aid.

Ahead of today's planned protest, which was called off at the last minute, there were worrying reports of threats against citizens who wish to exercise their right to express their opinions of the economic situation via peaceful protests, with allegations of increased surveillance of, and threats against, civil society organizations by State agents.

More disturbing still, there have been reports of actual physical attacks on, and arrests and detention of, civil society leaders and activists over the past few months, with one human rights defender and one political activist reportedly temporarily abducted and severely beaten by unidentified armed men a few days ago, apparently because of their role in helping to organize the protests today. In the last few hours, we have heard reports of more such cases and are looking into them. Senior officials have also reportedly issued threats against organisers of demonstrations or against people who take part in them.

State authorities have a duty to ensure people's rights to freedom of expression, and to facilitate and protect the right to peaceful assembly. In addition, we urge the Senate when reviewing the Maintenance of Peace and Order Bill to protect the essential democratic freedoms of peaceful assembly and demonstration by ensuring the Bill's compliance with the Constitution, decisions of the Constitutional Court, and international human rights standards.

In January, we expressed concerns about reports of excessive use of force, including live ammunition, by Zimbabwean security forces during protests following the announcement of an increase in petrol prices. We are not aware of the indictment or prosecution of a single alleged perpetrator of human rights violations committed during or after of those protests. The Government does not appear to have carried out the requisite investigations into the violence, including the alleged excessive use of force by security forces, in a prompt, thorough and transparent manner, with a view to accountability, and we urge it to do so without further delay.

We also urge the Government to redouble its efforts to address the current challenges through a national dialogue, with the support of the international community, and to ensure that civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and activists can carry out their activities in a safe and secure environment without fearing intimidation or reprisals for their work.

ENDS

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