

COMMONWEALTH HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVE

PRESS RELEASE

COMMONWEALTH HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVE CALLS ON NIGERIAN PRESIDENT NOT TO INVITE ZIMBABWE TO THE UPCOMING COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, the Commonwealth's premier human rights NGO, has called on Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo, to remain firm in enforcing Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth by not inviting the Zimbabwe's Head of Government, President Mugabe, to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Nigeria from 5-8 December 2003.

Recent reports indicate that President Mugabe is putting pressure on the Nigeria's President Obasanjo, whose country is hosting this year's CHOGM, to extend an invitation to him to attend the meeting. President Mugabe's request comes despite the fact that the Commonwealth has unanimously agreed that Zimbabwe be suspended from the Commonwealth because of the failure of the Zimbabwean Government to uphold the principles of the Commonwealth's Harare Declaration, including respect for democracy, the rule of law and human rights.

President Mugabe now argues that the suspension is racially-based and is being spearheaded by Britain and Australia. The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, an international NGO based in New Delhi and committed to working for the practical realisation of all people throughout the Commonwealth, does not support this view.

CHRI maintains that Zimbabwe must remain suspended until the Government demonstrates that it is committed to upholding the principles to which the Commonwealth is committed, including a commitment to the protection and promotion of human rights. The Government's continued disregard for the human rights of its people, both black and white, is distressing and cannot be ignored. To attempt to characterise the international community's condemnation of the Government's actions as racially-based disrespects the continued suffering of many millions of Zimbabweans throughout the country.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has reported that Zimbabweans continue to face a particularly severe humanitarian crisis, with nearly half the population having had their livelihoods eroded by severe macroeconomic decline and precarious food security. Civil and political rights continue to be violated. The Government's interference with independent newspapers such as the Daily News, The Sunday, The Standard and The Independent represent a flagrant interference with the right to freedom of expression. Likewise, violations of the freedoms of association, expression and assembly continue, as was most recently demonstrated by the arrests of members of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions during a peaceful protest.

CHRI calls on Nigeria's President Obasanjo to demonstrate his solidarity and concern for the Zimbabwean people by refusing to succumb to President Mugabe's cynical attempts to play the 'race card' and justify the suffering he has inflicted on his own people on racial grounds. CHRI encourages President Obasanjo to demonstrate his vision and commitment to an Africa striving to better the lives of all its people and ensure the practical realisation of their human rights, by supporting Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth and declining to invite President Mugabe to next month's CHOGM. The people of Zimbabwe deserve no less.

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