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Welcome to Zimbabwe.....

- a report on Zimbabwe's systematic violation of Human Rights

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Women raped due to their perceived political affiliation; the bombing of an independent broadcasting organization; torture and arbitrary arrests by the police; intimidation of the judiciary; and widespread food shortages — these are all incidents which seem horrifying to the global citizen, but are current realities for this country. Welcome to Zimbabwe, a nation in crisis.

The world is aware of President Mugabe's land reform system through extensive international press coverage accompanied by pictures of white landowners being violently removed from farms. However this is just the tip of the iceberg – a closer look reveals how Mugabe's controversial land policies are only one of many issues of concern in the country: grim statistics confirm a shocking picture.

The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum compiles a monthly report of violence, and from January to the end of September 2002, this included:

- 358 cases of political intimidation or discrimination;
- 62 death threats;
- 223 abductions;
- 1057 cases of torture;
- 280 cases of unlawful detention or arrest;
- 58 murders

To illustrate: In terms of electoral and political rights, the Commonwealth Observer Group concluded that during the presidential elections in May 2002, there was a high level of political violence and "conditions in Zimbabwe did not adequately allow for a free expression of will by the electors". Similar concerns could be expressed about the local elections held in September, with rules for registration of candidates changing weeks before the election making it impossible for many opposition candidates to stand, and widespread intimidation forcing the withdrawal of many candidates.

CHRI's press release (see box) expressed our concerns. Furthermore, women are at risk of sexual violence, due to their perceived political affiliations. From June to August 2002, ten women approached the Amani Trust (an NGO helping victims of organized violence and torture) alleging rape due to their party affiliation. As rape tends to be grossly underreported, the real numbers are likely to be much higher.

The arrest of Dr Frances Lovemore of the Amani Trust is one recent example of human rights activists being victimized by the grip of Mugabe's control. Following her discussion with international press of the incidents above, she was arrested for dissemination of false information. Zimbabwean activists protest that her arrest and mistreatment is a blatant manipulation of the Public Order and Security Act used to stifle freedom of speech, intimidate critics and screen the government from domestic and international scrutiny.

The media has been another easy target for Mugabe's regime. In flagrant disregard for freedom of speech, independent media has been restricted, journalists arrested and reportedly threatened with violence or death by the police if their stories are critical of the government. A recent example of attempts to silence independent media is the bombing of the 'Voice of the People', a private radio station, on August 29, 2002.

The judiciary too has not been spared, and judges expressing dissent have been intimidated. The 4 a.m. arrest (on September 13, 2002) of the recently retired Justice Fergie Blackie is yet another example of the absence of rule of law. Although no formal charges were filed, he was arrested for allegedly contravening the Prevention of Corruption Act. Most disturbing were the abhorrent post-arrest conditions in which he was held: for the first 32 hours he was allegedly denied access to a lawyer, a phone call to his family, and food or necessary medication.

The police, rather than acting as impartial public officers, are blatantly used for political purposes. Not only have they failed to stop violence, they themselves have been perpetrators of torture, as well as active agents in arbitrary detention and arrests.

Another tool in the arsenal of abuse is food, which is reportedly used for political purposes. Government officials responsible for food distribution are widely alleged to discriminate against suspected opposition supporters. This action, in a country brought to its knees by current poor food production, drought, and the disastrous effects of AIDS, is contemptible. As a member country of the Commonwealth, Zimbabwe must abide by the principles of the Harare Commonwealth Declaration; however recent behaviour shows a gross disregard for international human rights instruments, including the Harare Declaration. This glaring record of abusive practices places the government within the mandate of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group², to investigate serious and ongoing violations of the Harare Principles. At their last meeting CMAG agreed to keep Zimbabwe on its agenda and let the Commonwealth Chairpersons' Committee on Zimbabwe continue its efforts.

Established at the last Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, this committee consists of the Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, the President of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, and the President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki. They have been attempting to promote the process of reconciliation in Zimbabwe and to engage President Mugabe in dialogue. However these activities have stalled. At their last meeting in September, they agreed to continue their policy of engagement with the Zimbabwe government and to monitor progress in the next six months, at which point stronger measures may be considered. Let us hope, for the sake of all Zimbabweans, that these will not be necessary.

PRESS RELEASE

Deju Vu in Zimbabwe: Indifference is Tantamount to Tacit Approval

*-CHRI press release prior to local elections in Zimbabwe
(19.09.2002)*

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), calls upon the international community, the Commonwealth countries, civil society and all supporters and advocates for transparent democratic process to vocally and in concert object to the forthcoming elections in Zimbabwe.

On September 28 and 29, Zimbabweans are to vote in local elections for councillors in 1397 rural and 27 urban wards throughout the country. The Zimbabwe government's repressive campaign against opposition parties in the country has been too profound and too pervasive to allow for free and fair elections. Human rights abuses have included incidents of violent repression, manipulations of registration requirements and prevention of the exercise of political rights by opposition political parties.

Nothing in the political climate in Zimbabwe has changed since the elections in March to indicate more respect for human rights or a more open and fair contest for councillors' seats. On the contrary, the decline of Zimbabwe's economy and the rapid increase of political instability has reduced the incentive for foreign investment and trade. The emerging food shortage and crisis of internally displaced people, created largely by the government's policies and actions, continues to daily threaten the lives and well-being of Zimbabweans.

In her call for action on the abuse of human rights, Ms Daruwala stated: "If we in the international community do not express our great concern at the violations of fundamental human rights in Zimbabwe, we are as culpable as the draconian regime currently inflicting such suffering on the people of Zimbabwe."