

Highlights from CHRI's Statement to the Commonwealth on Zimbabwe

1. The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) welcomes the Commonwealth Secretary-General's March 16th 2003 statement that Zimbabwe will remain suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth. CHRI also welcomes the Secretary-General's assurance that this matter will be discussed at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in December 2003. However, more action must be taken to ensure protection of human rights of the Zimbabwean people.
2. Many of CHRI's concerns about human rights violations in Zimbabwe have been expressed in past submissions to the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). We note with deep concern that the situation has not improved, and that in fact the government has been pursuing an agenda disrespectful of human rights, and consequently the situation has worsened considerably.
3. Many local and international human rights groups have carefully monitored and documented thousands of cases of human rights abuse in Zimbabwe. CHRI is particularly concerned that:
 - ◆ Food is being used for political purposes, with government officials who are responsible for food distribution discriminating against suspected supporters of the Opposition. This action, in a country brought to its knees by current poor food production, drought, and the disastrous effects of AIDS, is reprehensible and has led to and will in the future continue to lead to great human tragedy.
 - ◆ Lack of government legitimacy: the Commonwealth Observer Group noted at the May 2002 Presidential elections, the political violence and the lack of free expression of the political will of the people. Similar concerns have been expressed about the local government elections in September, with registration rules for candidates changing weeks before the election making it impossible for many to stand, and widespread intimidation forcing the withdrawal of many candidates.
 - ◆ Restricted civil society space: CHRI deplores the way that laws such as the Public Order and Security Act are used to stifle freedom of speech, intimidate critics and screen the government from domestic and international scrutiny. This includes restrictions on the work of many NGOs and civil society groups.
 - ◆ Summary and extra-judicial executions, illegal arrests, and unlawful detention have been used particularly against the Opposition and vulnerable sections of society. This has created widespread fear and insecurity, when it is the duty of a government to ensure personal security and civil liberties.
 - ◆ Media restrictions: 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 and its policies. An example of attempts to silence independent media is the multiple arrests of local and foreign journalists.
 - ◆ Organized violence has increased in scope and number of incidents. Torture and political rape have been used to intimidate the opposition.
4. In view of all of the above, CHRI has a number of recommendations to the Commonwealth:
5. Zimbabwe should remain suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth until there is compliance with Commonwealth standards of good governance, human rights and rule of law. A specific Commonwealth human rights inquiry should be conducted in Zimbabwe prior to re-admittance.
6. CHRI calls for Zimbabwe to remain on the agenda of CMAG. CMAG should continue to closely monitor the situation and take a proactive role in promoting a restoration of democracy, rule of law and protection of human rights.
7. CHRI calls on the Commonwealth Secretariat and CMAG to continue to try to engage President Mugabe in dialogue. However, recognizing that this has previously stalled and that Commonwealth Observers found the Presidential elections unfair and recognizing the situation of starvation and political distribution of food, CHRI calls on the Secretary-General to include the leader of the Opposition, Director of the World Food Programme and civil society organizations in discussions.
8. CHRI calls on the Commonwealth to give urgent attention to the deteriorating food situation in Zimbabwe, as immediate international intervention is needed to avert further calamity.
9. CHRI urges Commonwealth countries to express grave concern about the plight of Zimbabwe's citizens in a country resolution at the 59th Session of the Commission on Human Rights in Geneva.
10. The Commonwealth must stand firm on issues of good governance, the rule of law and human rights. To ignore violations of these principles is to risk the credibility of the Commonwealth as an organization, and jeopardize the welfare of Zimbabweans. ■