

Harare: April 6th, 2011

CSOs STATEMENT ON THE HARASSMENT AND PERSECUTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The continued harassment of Mr. Abel Chikomo, the Executive Director of the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum (the Forum) by unnamed state agents - using police officers from Harare Central's Law and Order Section as a front - is as deplorable as it is unjustifiable. The attack on Chikomo and the Forum is not just an attack on one individual and/or one organization but an attack on all civil society organisations (CSOs) in Zimbabwe.

Police and all other state agents must stop attacking the messenger and start attending to the message.

The Forum is operating entirely in accordance with the laws of Zimbabwe. It is difficult therefore to understand what the basis or justification is for the continued harassment of the Executive Director of the Forum.

It is a matter of public record that, over the years, the work of the Forum – and that of its members and other CSOs – has contributed immensely to the positive realization of the rights of the marginalized, vulnerable and oppressed in our society. The work has also exposed the excesses of the state, including gross human rights violations.

Due to mismanagement, corruption and bad policies of the state, CSOs in Zimbabwe have been forced to perform – and are still performing – many of the functions of this dysfunctional state. The state should learn to appreciate rather than attack and attempt to criminalize the work of these legitimate organizations.

Those who dishonestly hide behind claims of “illegality” of the Forum can neither wish these issues away, nor seek to undermine the positive contribution made by the Forum and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to Zimbabwe and her people.

The attack on the Forum is yet another in a long line of attempts to clamp down on legitimate civil society and is reminiscent of similar attacks in 2004 that culminated in the aborted draconian NGO Bill. In recent months a number of CSOs including Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, NANGO, and WOZA, among many, have had their operations disrupted on allegations that they were acting “contrary” to some law. Some offices have been raided and staff harassed in unclear circumstances.

The work of the Forum, as with other NGOs, is lawful and peaceful. Instead of wasting scarce resources on attacks, intimidation and other harassment, the state should be seeking to strengthen relations with CSOs to improve the situation for the benefit of the country. The recent SADC Troika meeting held in Zambia reaffirmed what Zimbabwe's political leaders bound themselves to through the GPA – bringing an end to violence, intimidation, hate speech, harassment and any other action that contradicts the letter and spirit of the GPA. Civil Society is demanding implementation of the same.

The state and/or those who seek to undermine the lawful operations of NGOs in the country should be aware that targeting one individual or organisation will not stop the work of human rights defenders and their organisations in Zimbabwe until and beyond the day when democracy, accountability and good governance are delivered.

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