



Zimbabwe: Unblock internet and cease security sector attacks on civilians

Johannesburg: 16 January 2019

The Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (SAHRDN) has today called on the government of Zimbabwe to immediately unblock all internet services, and to halt the ongoing use of lethal force against unarmed civilians. The SAHRDN calls on the Zimbabwe government to recognize and guarantee the rights of citizens to peaceful protests as enshrined in the Zimbabwe constitution and international human rights instruments that Zimbabwe is party to.

On 14 January 2019, thousands of Zimbabweans took to the streets in various parts of the country to protest the announcement made by President Emmerson Mnangagwa on the fuel price increase, as well as the dismal economic outlook which is affecting the ability of Zimbabweans to enjoy socio-economic rights.

Following the protests on 14 January 2019, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights reported that several members of the Zimbabwe National Army (the military) and the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) randomly carried out door-to-door raids in high density suburbs through forced entry, by breaking down doors and windows. Several residents in those areas were brutally assaulted by members of the military and the ZRP and some have been detained.

In Harare, the military and the police shot at people resulting in some fatalities and serious injuries. Properties were damaged and hundreds of protesters were arrested. The headquarters of the opposition political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) were set alight. Protesters were also injured and arrested in Bulawayo, another major city in Zimbabwe.

On 15 January 2019, Zimbabwe's government moved to block citizens' access to the internet, including social media and email, as protests continued to spread in the country. Businesses and schools remain shut down in many parts of the country and there continues to be heavy presence of the military and the police in high density suburbs.



“We condemn the excessive use of force to quell protests in Zimbabwe and urge the security forces to exercise restraint” stated Timmothy Mtambo the Deputy Chairperson of the SAHRDN and Executive Director of Center for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR) in Malawi. “The involvement of the military (in policing) is unlawful and unjustified in a functional democracy” added Mtambo.

The SAHRDN notes with regret the ready resort by the government of Zimbabwe to use of the army and lethal force against unarmed civilians when faced with protests arising from causes related to the mismanagement and dysfunctionality of the economy.

“Less than a month ago, the Commission of Inquiry into Post Election violence led by the former President of South Africa, Kgalema Montlanthe, found that the police and the military used ‘unjustified and disproportionate’ force to kill 6 people during post-election protests in 2018” said Kaajal Ramjathan-Keogh, a board member of the SAHRDN and Executive Director of the Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC). “It is therefore quite disconcerting for us that while the soldiers who used lethal force against civilians on 1 August 2018 have not been brought to justice, the authorities have again deployed soldiers and armed personnel in civilian clothes to harass and torment unarmed civilians” added Ramjathan-Keogh.

The SAHRDN notes that access to the internet is now an integral part and pre-condition to enjoy the right to freedom of information and expression.

“It is now accepted that access to the internet is essential to the enjoyment of rights” argued Lucia Da Silveira a board member of the SAHRDN and Executive Director of AJPD Angola “We therefore strongly condemn the shutdown of the internet as it shows that the government may have a sinister motive that it wants to hide from the glare of the international community” added Da Silveira.

The SAHRDN therefore calls on the government of Zimbabwe to immediately fully restore internet services to the people of Zimbabwe. The SAHRDN reminds the government of Zimbabwe that internet shutdown violates international law – it not only prevents public debate, but it also deprives Zimbabweans of access to essential services and basic resources.



The SAHRDN urges the government of Zimbabwe to recognize the right to peaceful protest and further urges all Zimbabweans not to resort to vandalism and destruction of property while exercising their constitutional rights. The SAHRDN also urges all stakeholders and citizens to pursue grievances peacefully and through the established legal channels.

*****END OF STATEMENT*****

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ABOUT THE SAHRDN

The Southern African Human Rights Defenders Network (SAHRDN) is a sub-regional Network consisting of representatives of Civil Society Organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations from Southern African countries, with the objectives to coordinate regional efforts to strengthen the protection and security of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and enhance their ability to carry on with their work in their particular countries in the face of state repression. The SAHRDN recognises and embraces the UN Declaration on HRDs that identifies HRDs as people who, individually or with others, peacefully act to promote or protect human rights. With a vision of safe and secure environment for HRDs in Southern Africa and a mission to enhance protective and safety mechanisms of HRDs in the region, the SAHRDN also recognises the legitimacy of human rights activities and the need to protect such activities and those who carry them out.

The SAHRDN **protects** HRDs through any of the following interventions: Fact Finding Missions; Legal support/Communications/Litigation at national and supra-national spheres; Urgent appeals; Campaigns; Evacuations; Medical support; Psychosocial support; relocation to Ubuntu Safe cities/human rights hubs.



The SAHRDN **builds the capacity** of HRDs through any of the following activities: Training on Risk Management; Security Enhancement Digital/Institutional/Physical; Regional/international human rights systems; and Communications and Complaints Procedures.

The **research and advocacy programme** of the SAHRDN undertakes research on the situation of HRDs in the Southern African Region, in the face of state and non-state-driven repression to facilitate evidence driven advocacy initiatives to protect HRDs at the national and international level.