

## **Statement: Alarming Escalation of State Repression in Zimbabwe Ahead of 44<sup>th</sup> SADC Summit**

Human rights and civil society organizations across the African continent are deeply concerned about the severe restriction of civic space and the systematic erosion of fundamental freedoms in Zimbabwe. The recent escalation in state-sponsored repression, characterized by abductions, arbitrary arrests and unjust denial of bail, torture, and harassment of human rights activists and opposition political members, represents a profoundly disturbing trend. This repressive environment is particularly concerning ahead of the 44<sup>th</sup> session of the SADC Summit of Heads of State and Government scheduled for 17 August 2024. It constitutes a direct assault on the fundamental rights of Zimbabwean citizens and an egregious violation of democratic principles and international standards.

The recent brutal crackdown on the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) exemplifies this escalating repression. On Wednesday, July 24, in Harare, ZINASU students peacefully convened for their annual General Council meeting when armed police in riot gear stormed the ZESA National Training Centre. The police violently disrupted the gathering, subjecting unarmed students to severe beatings and arresting several attendees, resulting in numerous injuries. ZINASU, a united front of Zimbabwean tertiary students, is dedicated to protecting students from exploitation and oppression, defending academic freedoms and rights, and promoting democracy.

This incident is not isolated but rather part of a broader and deeply troubling pattern of intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and victimization of civic groups and the opposition. Currently, over 77 democracy activists are languishing in pre-trial detention after the High Court denied them bail following their arrest for holding a peaceful meeting at a private residence in Harare. The detained members include children, elderly men, and women, some of whom were severely beaten and tortured while in custody. Previously, opposition politician Mr. Job Sikhala was detained for 595 days from June 2022, frequently denied bail, kept in leg irons, in solitary confinement, and often denied access to his lawyer and relatives. Obert Masaraure, president of the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ) has also been subjected to numerous long drawn-out criminal proceedings and pre-trial detentions, and was recently convicted of the crime of Obstruction of Justice for an alleged tweet in solidarity with an arrested colleague. The judiciary and law enforcement agencies are being weaponized to prosecute and persecute political opponents, signalling an alarming escalation of domestic repression.

Moreover, there has been a disturbing rise in extrajudicial killings, forming part of state-sanctioned violence against activists. Following the controversial August 2023 elections, several opposition members were abducted, tortured, and killed, including political activist Mr. Tapfumaneyi Masaya, who was abducted, tortured, and murdered on November 12, 2023. These incidents highlight the ongoing injustices against defenceless citizens and the relentless shrinking of democratic space. Additionally, recent death threats issued by Zimbabwe's Information Minister, Mr. Jenfan Muswere, accusing the opposition and civil society organizations of planning to instigate chaos and subversive activities, further exacerbate fears.

President Mnangagwa's remarks warning against “rogue elements” inciting civil disorder ahead of the SADC Summit underscore the state's intent to suppress dissent.

On 31 July 2024, pro-democracy activist Namatai Kwekweza, trade unionist Robson Chere, and former councillor, opposition member Samuel Gwenzi and Vusumuzi Moyo were apprehended and removed by suspected security service officers from a domestic flight headed to Victoria Falls for a civil society workshop. For at least eight hours they were held incommunicado, their whereabouts unknown to both family and lawyers. When their lawyers eventually accessed them, Robson Chere had been visibly tortured and was in great pain. During consultations with their lawyers all of them reported being tortured and subjected to cruel inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment. They have now been absurdly charged with disorderly conduct in a public place.

We remind the Zimbabwean government of its obligations under article 4 of the SADC Treaty which requires its member states to act in accordance with the principles of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Section 44 of the Zimbabwean Constitution mandates the respect, protection, promotion, and fulfilment of the rights and freedoms delineated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the right to freedom of assembly and association as specified in Section 58. These rights are also enshrined in international law and several binding regional instruments, including Articles 10 and 11 of the African Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights (African Charter), Article 8 of the African Charter, Articles 20 and 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Articles 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These rights are central to Zimbabwe’s constitutional democracy, providing a vital avenue for citizens to advance their objectives of promoting human rights and freedoms.

Gatherings of student unions, political parties and civil society organizations have never posed a security threat. We demand a clear and coherent explanation from the authorities for such heavy-handed actions, which only serve to heighten unnecessary security fears ahead of the SADC Summit.

~Ends~

**Coordinated by Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network  
(SouthernDefenders)**

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**Signed By:**

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- 4. Center for Democracy and Human Rights (CDD) Mozambique**
- 5. Center for Strategic Litigation**

6. Centre for Human Rights - University of Pretoria
7. Chapter One Foundation
8. Chitungwiza residents trust (CHITREST)
9. Coalition des volontaires pour la paix et Développement
10. Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations (CEHRO Ethiopia)
11. Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition
12. Democratic Alliance
13. DITSHWANELO - The Botswana Centre for Human Rights
14. Ecumenical Service on Southern Africa KASA
15. Friends of Angola (FOA)
16. Human Rights Forum, South Africa (HRFSA)
17. Human Rights Institute of South Africa (HURISA)
18. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
19. Khulumani Support Group
20. Langa Community Advice Services
21. Magamba Network (Zimbabwe)
22. Masvingo United Residents and Ratepayers Alliance (MURRA)
23. Mozambique Human Rights Defenders Network (RMDDH)
24. National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders - Kenya
25. Network of the independent Commission for Human rights in North Africa CIDH
26. Pan Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (African Defenders)
27. Pan African Lawyers Union (PALU)
28. Protection International Africa
29. Save Our Sacred Lands (SOSL, South Africa)
30. Seinoli Legal Centre (Lesotho)
31. Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI)
32. Southern Africa Doctors for Human Rights (SADHR)
33. Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC)
34. Southern Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Southern Defenders)
35. Tanzania Human Rights Defenders Coalition (THRDC)
36. The Forge Foundation (TFF, South Africa)
37. The Mike Campbell Foundation (Zimbabwe/UK)
38. The Public Interest Practice (South Africa)
39. Ukuthula Trust
40. Women's Academy For Leadership and Political Excellence (WALPE)
41. Women's Institute for Leadership Development (WILD)
42. Youth and Society (YAS, Malawi)
43. Zambia Council for Social Development (ZCSD)
44. Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR)
45. Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights)
46. Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU)
47. Zimbabwe Solidarity Network (ZSN)