

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

Zimbabwe: Ongoing arbitrary detention of Ms. Florence Ndlovu for discussing torture issues

Paris-Geneva, May 27, 2011. *The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), strongly condemns the arbitrary arrest of two Zimbabwean human rights defenders and the continuing detention of one of them, in a context of repression against human rights defenders prevailing in the country.*

On May 23, 2011, Ms. **Florence Ndlovu** and Mr. **Walter Dube**, respectively Regional Coordinator for Matabeleland province and Paralegal Officer for Matabeleland, Midlands and Masvingo provinces for Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights), were arbitrarily arrested by the police as they were coming out of a workshop in Tsholotsho. This arrest took place soon after the police disrupted this workshop, which had been convened by ZimRights to raise villagers' awareness about torture and its effects.

For more than 48 hours - the legal time-frame within which one can be detained without being brought before Court - the Zimbabwean police denied holding the two. Yet, their illegal detention by the police was proved by the presence of their vehicle in front of the police station in Matabeleland North province, both on May 23 and 24.

In the late afternoon of May 26, 2011, the police finally confirmed their detention at Lupane police station. Later in the day, Mr. Dube was released with summons pending further investigation, while Ms. Ndlovu was maintained in detention on charges of contravening Section 31 of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act for allegedly "communicating false statements prejudicial to the State". The two defenders were detained during three days without any access to their lawyers.

The police alleged that Ms. Ndlovu told villagers who participated in ZimRights workshop that the "police torture and assault people". However, Ms. Ndlovu denied the allegations and indicated that she only spoke about examples and scenarios of torture.

The Observatory strongly condemns Ms. Florence Ndlovu's detention and urges the Zimbabwean authorities to release her immediately and unconditionally, as her detention seems to merely aim at sanctioning her human rights activities, as well as to guarantee in all circumstances her physical and psychological integrity.

"It is clear that Ms. Ndlovu and Mr. Dube have been unlawfully arrested and detained in retaliation for their legitimate human rights activities. We are very concerned about Ms. Ndlovu's physical and psychological integrity considering the infamous conditions of detention at the Lupane police station. A few months ahead of the general elections, the authorities of Zimbabwe still have to demonstrate their maturity to tolerate free discussions on human rights issues", said Ms. Belhassen, FIDH President.

"We are very concerned for all Zimbabwean human rights defenders in a context of increasing acts of harassment and intimidation at this moment and we accordingly call upon the authorities to put an end to all acts of harassment against defenders in the country. The authorities should be particularly cautious to ensure that the rights of those under arrest are not patently violated by law enforcement bodies", said Eric Sottas, OMCT Secretary General.

More generally, the Observatory urges the authorities in Zimbabwe to comply with the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, as well as all regional and international instruments on human rights ratified by Zimbabwe.

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