



ZIMBABWE

**Crackdown escalates in Harare
ahead of SADC Summit**

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HARARE – In the buildup to the 44th SADC Summit to be held in Harare on 17-18 August 2024, the Zimbabwe Government has moved repeatedly to prohibit opposition and civil society public events.

President Emmerson Mnangagwa's administration is reportedly worried about rumoured protests during the summit after a damning report on the disputed August 2023 polls.

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The SADC Election Observers Mission (SOEM) led by Zambia opposition leader Nevers Mumba released their report declaring the outcome of the polls as not free and fair, a charge denied by Mnangagwa and ZANU PF. Several other election observer missions issued similar damning and adverse reports.

The opposition have been vocal on social media seeking fresh elections, citing SOEM and other reports, a development that has seen the regime putting its security forces on high alert. Fearing embarrassment.

Mnangagwa's security apparatus have cracked down on public gatherings, for instance banning an NGO Forum public exhibition that had been slotted for 26-27 July 2024 at Harare Gardens.

Two weeks earlier, police gate-crashed a meeting of the Zimbabwe National Students Union (ZINASU) and arresting 44 students that had gathered to elect a new leadership.

CFE has it on good authority that most civil society organizations have postponed private meetings and gatherings for fear of being arrested and jailed by the Harare regime ahead of the Summit in which Mnangagwa is expected to assume the rotational chairmanship.

Police are refusing to sanction any opposition gatherings - effectively banning them - allowing only ZANU PF functions which presently are focused on campaigning for the coming elections.

All street vendors are being systematically uprooted from the central business district as well as major highways and streets in a clean-up ahead of the SADC summit.

In Kariba, thirteen activists including an opposition legislator have been arrested as President Emmerson Mnangagwa's administration increasingly gets paranoid ahead of the summit.

Honourable John Houghton, the member of parliament for Kariba, former Kariba mayor George Masendu, Farai Mageva and others have been arrested for peacefully protesting with placards demanding the release of former minister and opposition official Jameson Timba and 76 others.

They are currently detained at Kariba Police Headquarters.

"This is Zimbabwe under Mnangagwa. The constitution has been suspended! The fight is on. Homeland or death! Zanu-PF Must Go!" said opposition official Gift Siziba, a close ally of Nelson Chamisa.

On Wednesday 31 July afternoon a crackdown on Zimbabwe citizens ahead of the summit had escalated with four pro-democracy activists forcibly removed off a Victoria Falls bound plane over allegations of participating in a demonstration.

The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) named the affected activists as Namatai Kwekweza, Robson Chere, Samuel Gwenzi and Vusumuzi Moyo.

In a statement late on Wednesday ZLHR said the four were in incommunicado and in detention for at least 8 hours.

Chere, the secretary general of Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, was said to be “visibly” tortured and in severe pain, according to the ZLHR, which is representing the four.

Pictures of them being forcibly removed from the plane and walking on the tarmac at the Robert Gabriel Mugabe (RGM) International Airport, have gone viral on social media.

Coincidentally, they were removed from the same plane which had scores of government officials going to attend the same conference on philanthropy at the resort town of Victoria Falls.

The ZLHR said the four activists have been advised that their charge is disorderly conduct.

The allegations are that they participated in a demonstration at Rotten Row Magistrate Court a few weeks ago when opposition leader Jameson Timba and 78 others appeared at court.

Timba, a former minister in the government of national unity of 2010 between Zanu PF and the original Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and a close ally of opposition leader Nelson Chamisa, was arrested on 16 June at his residence together with 77 others.

To this day they remain in jail as the government claims they would foment trouble during the SADC summit.

Meanwhile the four pro-democracy activists spent Wednesday night at Harare Central Police Station after being held incommunicado at the RGM International Airport.

Roselyn Hanzi, the Executive Director of ZLHR, took to X last night condemning the arrest, torture and detention of the four activists.

“The practice of torture is barbaric, archaic. Torture is a crime against humanity. Torture is regarded as part of customary international law and all states are bound by customary international law. It is very sad that Robson Chere was severely tortured,” said Hanzi.

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Meanwhile, the Zimbabwe parliament has adjourned until 20 August before the tabling of two controversial media laws: The Media Practitioner Bill and the amendments to the Zimbabwe Media Commission (ZMC).

The Media Practitioners Bill would, among other things, put minimum entry qualifications for journalists to practice in Zimbabwe. It is proposed the minimum entry be a diploma from a recognised and registered tertiary institution.

Amendments to the ZMC Act would usher in a form of media co-regulation. While the principle of co-regulation is contested and a compromised position, many of the major media stakeholders are arguing that half a loaf is better than nothing.

The government is proposing a single professional body to help ZMC regulate media in a co-regulation mechanism.

CFE is deeply concerned by the escalation of the Zimbabwean government in preventing and suppressing its citizens in participating in the national and regional political sphere.

This worrying trend diminishes the importance of good governance and democracy and prevents activists, citizens and journalists in engaging in their right to freedom of expression, access to information and freedom of association.

The Campaign for Free Expression is a non-profit organisation dedicated to protecting and expanding the right to free expression for ALL, and enabling EVERYONE to exercise this right to the full, whether it by speaking out, by protesting, by revealing information, by blowing the whistle on wrong-doing, by arguing, debating, writing, painting, composing or just by shouting out your opinion.

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