



INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2020 STATEMENT

Thursday, 10 December 2020

Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, an umbrella body of civil society organisations in Zimbabwe joins the rest of the world in commemorating International Human Rights Day.

The day is observed on the 10th of December each year to commemorate the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948.

The theme for this year's commemoration is *"Recover Better- Stand Up for Human Rights"* with a particular focus on the Covid-19 pandemic and emphasising on the need to put human rights at the centre of recovery efforts following the global pandemic. In essence, the theme prioritises humanitarian assistance as one of the pathways to recovery.

As we commemorate International Human Rights Day, it has to be noted that civil, political as well as socio-economic rights have largely come under threat within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) due to the advent of Covid-19 with the political elite abusing the lockdown regulations to tighten their grip on power by weakening checks and balances and this press release has a special focus on the failures/violations that were exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

These include gross human rights violations in the form of rape, torture, inequalities, discrimination, corruption, inadequate provision of health services, food insecurity among other rights violations. In essence, the democratic deficiencies in most SADC countries were worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Many SADC countries issued decrees that gave the police and the army expanded powers to enforce lockdown regulations but this, later on, turned to be a consolidation of authoritarian rule with the police and the army emerging as the biggest violators of human rights while Covid-19 responses were largely militarised and centralised.

The "Recover Better- Stand Up for Human Rights" theme dovetails well with the situation in most SADC countries as the advent of the Covid 19 pandemic triggered an upsurge in cases of human rights violations and a dire humanitarian situation.

The recent World Food Program (WFP) projects that by the end of 2020, 8 million Zimbabweans will need humanitarian assistance, a situation caused by Covid-19, drought and climate change.

The situation is not that different in Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and South Africa where there has been a severe reduction in food production caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

While the South African government has been making attempts to provide safety nets to the vulnerable groups, the situation continues to be dire due to lack of stable economic activity and an upsurge in Covid-19 cases. Corruption has also affected the fight against Covid-19 in South

Africa while leaving many citizens vulnerable. A case in point is the issue of the US\$26 Billion meant for Covid-19 relief which was largely unaccounted for.

Cases of rights violations, including displacements and torture were also recorded in South Africa with the major perpetrators being the police and the army.

In Malawi, senior government officials, including former First Lady, Gertrude Mutharika were implicated in the looting of Covid-19 funds. This came at a time the Malawian government was under fire for failing to cater for vulnerable children during the Covid-19 pandemic as prescribed by the country's Child Care, Protection and Justice Act.

Lack of water, soap and personal protective equipment also led to a surge in Covid-19 cases in Malawi's prisons and by September 2020, 408 prisoners and 26 staff members had been infected.

Former Malawian President, Peter Mutharika's proclamation of a national lockdown which was supposed to start on April 18, 2020, was largely viewed as an attempt to suspend Presidential elections and prolong his stay in power. The former President also faced resistance after he proclaimed the national lockdown without putting in place safety nets to cushion vulnerable citizens.

In Zambia, the situation was slightly similar to Malawi as the Covid-19 pandemic worsened the effects of under-investment in water, sanitation and hygiene services while the government generally failed to provide social safeguards for citizens.

The police in Zambia fuelled human rights violations after the national police spokesperson announced that Zambian police had adopted a hit and detain strategy while Minister Bowman Lusambo was on record that citizens would be subjected to thorough beatings if they defied the Presidential order to stay at home.

In Mozambique, the situation needs urgent humanitarian response particularly in the Cabo Delgado region where more than 300 000 people have been displaced as a result of terrorist insurgency. The humanitarian situation is likely to worsen given the displacements and also the fact that this Northern part of Mozambique has some of the highest cases of Covid-19 cases.

Mozambique has also recorded cases of attacks on journalists who were working to expose corruption related to the procurement of Covid 19 materials.

In Zimbabwe, human rights violations in the form of abductions, torture, arbitrary arrests, as well as intimidation of journalists for exposing corruption, have been prevalent. The most notable cases of persecution of journalists are those of Tawanda Muchehiwa and Hopewell Chin'ono.

Chin'ono was arrested in July 2020 for exposing a US\$60 Million fraud relating to the procurement of Covid-19 kits. The fraud involved former Minister of Health, Obadiah Moyo who was relieved of his duties after the scandal was unearthed.

However, the State proceeded to charge Hopewell Chin'ono with inciting public violence and the journalist spent 42 days in detention while Moyo was given bail a day after his arrest. These are just examples of some of the human rights violations that have been taking place during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Access to health also remained a major challenge with the Covid-19 pandemic further exposing the dire situation in Zimbabwe's hospitals. Cases of patients dying as a result of failure to access health care at public hospitals were recorded and the situation worsened after health workers at the public hospitals embarked on industrial action due to poor remuneration as well as poor working conditions.

The right to education was also under serious threat as the government failed to provide online learning to learners while teachers continued to protest against poor salaries and poor working conditions.

The Covid-19 pandemic provided an opportunity to autocratic governments to shrink political and civic space in the above-mentioned countries mainly due to rights violations under the enforcing Covid-19 regulations.

As the world commemorates International Human Rights Day, the Crisis Coalition would like to call for total commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

More importantly, we reiterate that "basic human rights and fundamental freedoms are inherent to all human beings, inalienable and equally applicable to everyone and that every one of us is born free and equal in dignity and rights".



We further call for adherence to the core principles of human rights as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and these include universality, interdependence and indivisibility, equality and non-discrimination.

Post the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an imperative need for new social contracts between governments and citizens while political, economic, social and cultural rights need to be put at the centre of recovery efforts.

We therefore call upon the SADC bloc to collectively mobilise resources to cushion vulnerable groups through provision of food, healthcare, education including other basic needs.

We implore SADC to work with other partners and draw up a clear roadmap to recovery post Covid-19 and this roadmap should put human rights at the centre of recovery efforts.

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