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Baroness Patricia Scotland
Secretary General
The Commonwealth
Commonwealth Secretariat
Marlborough House London
by email

26 November 2024

Dear Secretary-General

Grave concerns re Zimbabwe's unqualified re-admission to the Commonwealth family

We write to bring to your attention the voices of civil society members and organisations in Zimbabwe, who are unable to write to you in their own name for fear of reprisals in Zimbabwe or elsewhere by state actors under the regime of President Mnangagwa.

ACTSA, together with diaspora and other pro-democracy formations, are sending this letter to ask that Zimbabwe is **not re-admitted** to the Commonwealth family at this time.

We know you have received letters from Zimbabweans with direct experience of the violence perpetrated by the current regime, including torture and illegal detentions, intended to attack basic constitutionally protected rights such as freedom of speech and of association. We ask that you take the sense of dread, fear and concern for the impunity seen in Zimbabwe and expressed in these submissions, very seriously. As a lawyer, we appreciate your deep knowledge of these matters and anticipate that the leverage of the Commonwealth family is applied to Zimbabwe with foresight.

ACTSA's report '*Voices from the Frontline in Zimbabwe*' published in September 2023, set out the pre-election violence experienced by grassroots organisers and human rights defenders. Report participants, who had to remain anonymous, set out seven recommendations for strengthening civil society in Zimbabwe, in advance of future elections and/or attacks on civil society and constitutional rights in the future. <https://actsa.org/voices-from-the-frontline-in-zimbabwe/>. Many of the fears expressed in that report have now been realised. A sample of relevant cases are listed at the bottom of this letter. More are contained in the report.

The central request of all the pro-democracy and constitutionally recognised civil society structures in Zimbabwe, and in the diaspora in the UK, is that Zimbabwe should not be re-admitted to the Commonwealth without the implementation of critical reforms.

Below we list a sample of the regular and routine abuses of human rights by the Zimbabwe state and draw attention again to the fact that the Motlanthe Commission of Enquiry report recommendations of 2018 have still not been implemented. This was mentioned in the SADC Election Observer report following the 2023 elections which were judged by SADC to fall below the standards of SADC and African Union barometers of free and fair elections. The

Commonwealth should ask for these recommendations and reforms to be implemented as an absolute minimum, before any consideration of re-admission.

We realise there are commercial interests at stake, Zimbabwe being a major source of lithium and other minerals necessary for transitions to alternative energy sources. However, other levers are open to business in terms of access to supplies of these minerals. Human rights cannot be traded, regardless of what other nations do or do not recognise, by way of rights for Zimbabweans. The Commonwealth is not predicated on commercial or business interests, and to that end, such considerations cannot play a role in re-admission criteria.

The risk of heightened impunity by the Zimbabwe regime is a major concern if it is re-admitted to the Commonwealth at this time. Given the calculated approach taken by the Zimbabwe government to silence dissent, as it did most recently with regard to the SADC summit, the UK should not be party to the Commonwealth charter standards being side-stepped by any member or nation seeking membership. To do so will undermine the Commonwealth and its goals. This is what we mean by 'acting with foresight'. Premature readmission without reforms would risk entrenching the current state of repression and impunity as 'normal' and accepted by Commonwealth heads of governments.

Others have written to you about systemic abuses in Zimbabwe including MPs who have directly been affected through abduction, torture and imprisonment without bail on false charges. Colleagues of theirs have had to flee the country. Others have been assassinated. Some are political asylum refugees in the UK with whom it is possible to speak directly, should you wish to hear of these things first hand.

Our report, by the very nature of the repression of civil society, offers a partial set of remedies to prevent a further falling behind of freedoms in Zimbabwe. Reforms are needed at institutional levels to address (i) Judicial Capture, where constitutional rights, such as the right to bail, are routinely disregarded, leaving many citizens detained unjustly. Such instances result in lost jobs, lost homes, damaged children and family relationships, indebtedness in order to seek justice, and further imperils any rights to redress. (ii) Electoral Irregularities: The Commonwealth Observer Group's findings highlighted extensive media bias, voter suppression, and a lack of judicial independence in the 2023 elections; (iii) Human Rights violations recorded and evidenced by civil liberties organisations are now in the thousands. From political violence to oppressive legislation such as the Private Voluntary Organizations Act, civil liberties remain severely restricted.

Without a principled approach to safeguarding the lives and freedoms of ordinary Zimbabweans, CHOGM will be party to ignoring continuing atrocities such as those sampled below.

A UK charity organisation working with ACTSA, Women of Zimbabwe (WoZ) is entirely opposed to the readmission of Zimbabwe into the Commonwealth. They document cases and assist women who have been sexually assaulted as a result of political activism (being politically active in local government in particular). Hundreds of women are affected by political intimidation. Just a few months ago, you will have surely heard of the case of Namatai Kwekweza and Jobson Chere, detained at the airport, tortured and deprived of their rights; still subject to judicial proceedings while it is common fact the charges levelled at them are political and manufactured. Your own work supporting women affected by domestic violence has resonance here.

WoZ asked us to include in our letter their list of examples of human rights abuses, which we do here:

- August 2018, six people were shot in broad daylight by uniformed soldiers who were patrolling the streets, no one has ever been held accountable or arrested for these killings (leading to the Motlanthe Enquiry).
- In 2019 during the fuel hike protest it is reported that over fifty women were raped and five people killed by suspected government agents.
- Between March 2022 and August 2023 hundreds of human rights and political activist were arrested, abducted, tortured, imprisoned and some lost their lives. Mboneni Ncube was speared to death at an opposition political rally in Kwekwe.
- June 8, 2022, Langelihle Dube was hacked to death with a machete in Matebeleland.
- Moreblessing Ali was abducted on 24 May 2022, her body was found on 11 June 2022 mutilated and decomposed in a well at a farm in Beatrice, Zimbabwe.
- Her lawyer, Job Sikhala was arrested and spent two years in prison for merely being their family lawyer, and who lost his practice after being detained for so long, despite being innocent of wrong doing.
- In August 2023 during the harmonised elections, an opposition member in Mabvuku, Harare was abducted and found dead a few days later. Zanu PF later installed their MP without an election process.

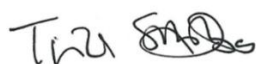
There are hundreds of cases of abductions where perpetrators are never held to account in Zimbabwe. As of today the case of the Avondale78 looms large: over forty opposition political leaders and human rights activists remain in prison, now sentenced and appealing to a higher court. (The original group of 78 people were arrested on June 16 this year on allegations of participating in an unlawful gathering and disorderly conduct, while marking the international day of the African Child at a private residence). One woman lost her unborn child; one child was imprisoned with its mother for weeks; another woman was injured and developed a life changing condition for which she was not adequately treated without a court order.

These are not 'individual' or occasional incidents, but systematic abuses of power designed to instil fear, particularly among women who are politically active. The threat of arrest on trumped up charges has directly reduced the number of women who are willing to stand for political leadership or organise. The case of Namatai Kwekweza was particularly shocking; her torture and that of her colleague Robson Chere are well documented.

In the circumstances, it would be a scathing judgement on the Commonwealth to overlook the desperate situation in Zimbabwe and re-admit the government of the day, at this time.

We, along with partners, remain available to meet with you or others to discuss further this situation, should you be willing to do so.

Yours sincerely,



Tricia Sibbons Director

With and representing 14 civil society organisations led by Zimbabweans, including Women of Zimbabwe.

CC. The Rt Hon David Lammy, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs

The Rt Hon the Lord Collins, FCDO

Sources:

[Slain CCC Member Langelihle Dube Burial Date Set - ZimEye](#) (Langelihle Dube)

[Parliamentary question | The murder of Mboneni Ncube | E-001461/2022 | European Parliament](#) (Mboneni Ncube)

[Zimbabwe: Authorities must do more to stop culture of abductions and killings - Amnesty International](#) (Moreblessing Ali)

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-67419968> (Bishop Masaya)

<https://actsa.org/voices-from-the-frontline-in-zimbabwe/>