

amnesty international news release

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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL TESTIFIES BEFORE U.S. CONGRESS ON INCREASED USE OF POLITICAL IMPRISONMENT, TORTURE AND EXECUTIONS IN RHODESIA/ZIMBABWE

Amnesty International testified today (Monday, April 2, 1979) before the U.S. Congress that the use of political imprisonment, torture and the death penalty in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe has been increasing sharply since the beginning of 1978. Malcolm Smart, Researcher on Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, presented the findings of the Nobel Prize winning organization in hearings today before the International Organizations and African Subcommittees of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in Washington.

Mr. Smart told the committees that the situation with regard to political imprisonment, torture and the death penalty has worsened since the beginning of 1978 in "both extent and gravity." "Despite an initial release of some detainees," AI said, "the overall trend has been towards a sharply increased use of detention without trial, particularly for interrogation purposes. Since torture is an invariable concomitant of interrogation, this too has very considerably increased to what might be described as epidemic proportions. While the number of long-term detainees is still below the level which existed at the time of internal settlement, the number of such detainees is again rising rapidly. Despite indications at the time of the March agreement that the transitional government would review the cases of sentenced political prisoners, this has not been done. On the contrary, these political prisoners who complete their sentences are immediately detained without trial for a further period. Nor has there been any reduction in the numbers of people appearing before the courts charged with political offences either of a violent or a nonviolent nature, so the sentenced political prisoner population is larger now than at any time in Rhodesian history. Despite grossly inadequate legal procedures, death sentences continue to be passed and executions to take place."

AI acknowledged in the testimony the difficulties facing a government involved in what amounts to a civil war but pointed out that "the pattern of torture and other violations . . . is one occurring after prisoners have been detained and are in custody, not in the course of hostilities. Furthermore, the transitional government's failure to act on reports of torture and its introduction of sweeping new powers of arbitrary arrest and incommunicado detention in September 1978 can only be interpreted as providing tacit acceptance of the use of excessive force as a routine instrument of investigation."

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According to AI, at the present time there are approximately 350 political detainees held under Section 19 of the Emergency Powers Act. AI said, however, that the number of people being held, especially under martial law provisions, is rising very fast. For example, in the Midlands area alone by the beginning of the year there were more than 1,000 political prisoners.

Along with the increase in political prisoners has come an increase in the reports of torture, according to AI. This situation has been worsened by the passage of the Indemnity and Compensation Act, which provides all members of the security forces with immunity against prosecution for any act committed "in good faith" during the course of security operations. No action has been taken by the transitional government to remedy this situation. Consequently, AI reports that "torture is still systematic, particularly during interrogation of short-term and martial law detainees. In fact, it would appear that the use of torture is at least implicitly condoned by the transitional government..." Methods of torture apparently include severe beatings, the use of electric shocks, whipping on the soles of the feet, and repeated immersion, head-first, in barrels of water until unconscious. AI adds that "the purpose appears to be not merely the obtaining of information about guerrilla activities but general intimidation of the rural population."

Executions are also on the increase, according to AI, while judicial protections against the use of the death penalty have been greatly weakened. Since April 1975, "the Rhodesian authorities have refused to provide information on executions not only to Parliament and the media but even to the dead man's family." More recently, with the introduction of martial law in September 1978, the power to impose the death penalty has been extended to military officers without legal training and right of judicial review has been removed. AI said that since secrecy was imposed in 1975 it is impossible to know how many people have been killed, but at least 150 are believed to have been hanged. The executions, AI said, have continued following the internal settlement, and it has been learned that the death penalty continues to be implemented in political cases.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: -Because of time pressures, we were able to deliver this release only to the major wire services in Washington, D.C.
-We are sending it to you now because we think it provides useful background information on the situation in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe.
-The full text of AI's testimony on Rhodesia/Zimbabwe can be obtained from Amnesty International U.S.A., 2112 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10023.