

## Global concern over Zimbabwe situation

Concern is growing internationally at the continued internet and news blackout in Zimbabwe, with the United Nations calling on the Government of Zimbabwe to stop the crackdown on protestors and engage its populace.



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The spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ravina Shamdasani, released a statement on concerns at the excessive use of force against protestors.

“We are deeply troubled by the socio-economic crisis that is unfolding in Zimbabwe and the repression of large scale protests in the country, following the Government’s decision to increase fuel prices. We call on the Government to find ways of engaging with the population about their legitimate grievances and to stop the crackdown against protestors.

“We are concerned about reports of the excessive use of force, including live ammunition, by Zimbabwean security forces during protests which started on Monday this week. People took to the streets to protest against economic austerity measures and the rise of fuel prices, which affect their already impoverished households and businesses, and limit access to basic goods and services.”

According to the UN statement, reports suggest that protestors burned tyres, used rocks to barricade roads, and blocked buses from taking passengers to work. A number of buildings were also set on fire and there were reports of looting.

Police responded with force, apparently including the use of live ammunition, reported the UN. “There are credible reports of a number of deaths – including of a police officer – and many more injured, as well as hundreds of arrests in relation to the protests.”



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Shamdasani said there were also worrying allegations of generalised intimidation and harassment by security forces carrying out door-to-door searches. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission has also received allegations of police beatings.

“According to official figures presented by the Minister of National Security, more than 600 people have been arrested countrywide. Among those detained are opposition leaders and prominent civil activists. We are also concerned that internet services have been severely disrupted in the last few days.

“We support the call of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission for the Government to set up a national dialogue, with wide participation of all sectors, to find solutions to the economic challenges the country is facing. We urge the Government to work with the support of the international community to ease the current crisis.

“We call on the Government ensure that security forces handle protests and exercise their power - especially the use of firearms and live ammunition - strictly in accordance with the country’s international human rights obligations and the relevant principles, including legality, necessity, proportionality, precaution and accountability.

“State authorities have a duty to ensure people’s rights to freedom of expression, and to facilitate and protect the right to peaceful assembly. It is essential that all sides, including the protestors, refrain from the use of violence and seek to resolve the situation peacefully.

“We call on the Government to carry out investigations into all reports of violence, including the alleged excessive use of force by security forces in a prompt, thorough and transparent manner, with a view to accountability. All those detained for the exercise of their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression should be promptly released,” the UN statement concluded.

## **Growing concern**

In Britain, the Minister of State for Africa, Harriett Baldwin, summoned the Zimbabwean Ambassador to the UK to brief the British Foreign Office on the situation in Zimbabwe.

Baldwin said: "I have been following the events in Zimbabwe over the last week with growing concern. Since the weekend there has been widespread unrest and a heavy security force response, with several people killed and many injured.

“While we condemn the violent behaviour of some protestors, and unlawful acts such as arson and looting we are deeply concerned that Zimbabwe’s security forces have acted disproportionately in response. In particular, there are disturbing reports of use of live ammunition, intimidation and excessive force.

“In addition, the Government of Zimbabwe shut off access to the internet on 15 and 16 January and continues to block a number of social media sites.”

Baldwin said the British government called on the Government of Zimbabwe to ensure its security forces “act professionally, proportionately and at all times with respect for human life and constitutional rights”.

“We further call on the Government of Zimbabwe to investigate all allegations of human rights abuses. We also urge the reinstatement of full internet access, consistent with citizens’ constitutional right to freedom of expression.”

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