

13 May 2019

Zimbabwe: Abduction, ill-treatment and judicial harassment of four human rights defenders

On 27 April 2019, during a meeting in Greystone Park, Harare, human rights defenders and teachers **Robson Chere**, **Jess Drury**, **Precious Ndlovu** and **Munyaradzi Ndawana** were abducted by a group of individuals in plain clothes, suspected to be state security agents, and taken to the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) section of Harare Central police station where they were interrogated about their human rights activities. They were released later on the same day but were charged with crimes against public order.

The meeting on 27 April 2019 was organised by the Amalgamated Rural Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (ARTUZ), an organisation defending the right to education in rural areas of Zimbabwe, and labour rights. The workshop focused on training teachers in educational techniques for community development, with an emphasis on non-violence and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

On 27 April 2019 at around 10:45am, in Greystone Park, Harare, Robson Chere, Jess Drury, Precious Ndlovu and Munyaradzi Ndawana were abducted by around ten individuals in plain clothes who forcibly entered a private property without a search warrant, forced the human rights defenders into two unmarked vehicles and confiscated all their training materials. The abductors are suspected to be agents of the Central Intelligence Organisation or the Military Intelligence Department.

The teachers were each taken into separate rooms and interrogated for more than four hours without being given information on their right to remain silent, or access to their lawyers. Their mobile phones were taken from them and they were told that no one knew where they were. Their lawyers were lied to by state security agents to ensure that they would not be found until they were handed over to the police. During the interrogation, for more than four hours, Robson Chere and Munyaradzi Ndawana were physically attacked, kicked and punched in the back, stomach and neck, while Jess Drury and Precious Ndlovu were threatened. After their abduction had been widely publicized, the teachers were transferred to the Law and Order section of the Zimbabwe Republic Police and charged with “participating in gathering with intent to promote public violence, breaches of the peace or bigotry”, punishable under Article 37 of the Criminal Code.

On the following day, human rights lawyer and ARTUZ board member, **Doug Coltart**, was summoned to Harare Central Police Station and charged with the same offence as the four teachers. His laptop was seized without a warrant and held without legal cause for three days during which his law firm experienced a cyber-attack which is suspected to be an attempt to gain access to the firm’s confidential information protected by attorney-client privilege.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the arbitrary detention, ill-treatment and judicial harassment of Robson Chere, Jess Drury, Precious Ndlovu and Munyaradzi Ndawana, and the judicial harassment of Doug Coltart, as it believes that these measures are solely motivated by their legitimate activities in defence of human rights. Front Line Defenders condemns the ongoing human rights violations by security forces and recognises them as part of an effort to clamp down on dissent, specifically against human rights defenders fighting for the right to education and labour rights in Zimbabwe.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Zimbabwe to:

1. Immediately drop all charges against Robson Chere, Jess Drury, Precious Ndlovu, Munyaradzi Ndawana and Doug Coltart, as it is believed that they are solely motivated by their legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of Robson Chere, Jess Drury, Precious Ndlovu and Munyaradzi Ndawana, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Zimbabwe are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free from all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

Front Line Defenders respectfully reminds you that the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals. We would particularly draw your attention to Article 5: *“For the purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, at the national and international levels: (a) To meet or assemble peacefully (b) To form, join and participate in non-governmental organizations, associations or groups (c) To communicate with non-governmental or intergovernmental organizations.”*

Please inform us of any actions that may be taken with regard to the above case.

Yours sincerely,



Andrew Anderson
Executive Director