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ZIMBABWEAN CIVIL SOCIETY FEAR RIGGED ELECTIONS AND POSTELECTION VIOLENCE

BRUSSELS – At a press conference this morning, organized by the international network of catholic development organizations CIDSE and ZimbabweWatch, a delegation of leading civil society representatives from Zimbabwe expressed deep concern about the probable outcome and conduct of the election in Zimbabwe due March 29.

“The incumbent government is illegitimate; under the current conditions these elections will be neither fair nor free. If the people had a real say, Mugabe would lose. But we fear that the government will ruthlessly use fraud and intimidation to steal the elections again”, said John Stewart, Director of NOVASC, a human rights NGO. “With things getting worse every day, there is urgency in a breakthrough towards political transition in Zimbabwe right now.”

While Mugabe is absolutely determined to win his reelection and seeks to silence opposition and media, arbitrary arrests, beatings and torture of members of the opposition, media and civil society are common. “With the regime realizing that its grip on power is waning, we are very afraid of a violent retaliation, as Mugabe will use any means to cling to power”, said Wilbert Mandinde from the Media Institute of Southern Africa.

The situation in Zimbabwe is that dire, that “people are looking towards any possibility for change. If the current Mugabe regime lives on, there is absolutely no hope for change”, said Maureen Kademaunga, Gender and Human Rights officer of the National Student Union (ZINASU). “What we need is transition towards a new kind of government, with principled leaders, who really are accountable to the people”.

The civil society leaders, gathered in Brussels, called on the EU and African states to undertake joint and tougher actions, based on common principles, to guarantee a democratic Zimbabwe. Takavafira Zhou, President of the Progressive Teachers Union, who was recently severely tortured at a ZANU-PF headquarters, said “Europe must not fail Zimbabwe, but work together with African countries on a solution. The international efforts in the Kenyan crisis have clearly shown the potential of coherent international intervention.”

Growing opposition to President Robert Mugabe's regime, due to economic hardship and growing divisions in his ruling ZANU-PF, means that the result of the elections is more uncertain than ever. With Simba Makoni, a former Finance Minister and opposition candidate from a faction within his own party, and the long serving opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai (MDC) running against him, Mugabe faces one of the most serious challenges since he has come to power after independence in 1980.

Political failures have been crippling the economy, caused unemployment rates above 80 % and ushered in an unheard-of inflation of 100.000 %. Affordable basic commodities, even water and fuel, have disappeared from the shops. Zimbabwe, once a success story, has become a grave humanitarian emergency where 80% of the population live in squalid conditions and have an extreme low life expectancy of 35 years.

At its last meeting, March 10, the Council of the European Union (GAERC) has repeated its concern about the humanitarian, political and economic situation in Zimbabwe, which, according to the Council, “may endanger the holding of free and fair elections”.

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