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Zimbabwean Catholic says church groups in danger 'at any time'

by Bronwen Dachs by Catholic News Service

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (CNS) -- Zimbabwean church groups are "in danger of police interference at any time," a Catholic official said after the Ecumenical Center in the capital, Harare, was raided June 9.

"No one is immune to these raids," Alouis Chaumba, head of Zimbabwe's Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, said in a June 10 telephone interview from Harare.

Chaumba said he is "afraid of what may happen to me and my family and my friends," noting that he knows many people who have been injured or had their property destroyed in the violence that followed late-March elections.

Harare's Ecumenical Center houses a variety of groups, including the Student Christian Movement of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance.

"Heavily armed members of the police, central intelligence and military personnel" raided the center and arrested five staffers, including the Student Christian Movement general secretary, Prosper Munatsi, the movement said in a June 10 statement.

Offices in the center were ransacked and computers, digital cameras and a minibus were confiscated, the statement said.

Also June 9, police "raided an organization that looks after orphans and the homeless and said it must close shop," Chaumba said.

Police are visible all over Zimbabwe, he said, noting that there are "roadblocks everywhere" with some

rural areas impossible to reach. Police officers "make you get out of your vehicle and take everything out before they start searching, which can take hours," he said.

The Student Christian Movement of Zimbabwe is the national office of the Geneva-based World Student Christian Federation. The Zimbabwe Christian Alliance was formed in 2005 to help the estimated 700,000 Zimbabweans who lost their homes and livelihoods in a government campaign in which riot police demolished homes and vendors' stalls in shantytowns around major cities.

The Student Christian Movement statement said the arrests and raid were aimed at hindering its work, which is "fully geared toward sensitizing Christian students and youth on their rights and responsibilities in the face of a break-or-make presidential runoff" election scheduled for June 27.

In the March elections, opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai garnered 47.9 percent of the vote, leading President Robert Mugabe, who has led Zimbabwe since 1980 and is widely blamed for the country's economic crisis. The runoff was scheduled because a minimum of 50 percent plus one vote was needed to win the presidency in the first round.

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A report on postelection violence in Zimbabwe by the Solidarity Peace Trust, an ecumenical group of church organizations from Zimbabwe and South Africa, said, "There needs to be a general recognition that Zimbabwe is sinking fast into the conditions of a civil war, propelled largely by the increasing reliance on violence by the ruling party to stay in power, and the rapidly shrinking spaces for any form of peaceful political intervention."

The report, released in Johannesburg, South Africa, May 21, contained about 50 eyewitness accounts of orchestrated beatings, torture and the destruction of homes and shops.

The Student Christian Movement of Zimbabwe said it viewed the June 9 "arrests and detentions as part of the broader campaign of intimidation orchestrated against defenseless citizens," noting that the government "has abdicated its duties by declaring war on its own people and creating an atmosphere of general insecurity among the populace."

It is "our sacred duty as civil society and opposition forces to continue fighting for the opening up of democratic space and justice in Zimbabwe," the statement said, noting that the time has come for church groups "not only to speak but also to act against injustice, oppression and corruption."

Zimbabwe has the world's highest inflation rate -- more than 100,000 percent -- an unemployment rate of more than 80 percent and severe shortages of basic foods and fuel.

Chaumba also said that Anglicans in Zimbabwe "are being beaten up in their churches and are bearing the brunt of the lack of freedom of worship" in the country.

Anglican bishops from Botswana, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe said in an early June pastoral letter that members of the Harare Diocese are being barred from praying in their churches, which "mirrors the persecution of Christians of the early church, and in this context we remind the perpetrators that then, as now, God still triumphs over evil."

The people of Zimbabwe are living in "an environment devoid of any resemblance of justice and peace," the bishops said.

They called on perpetrators of "the immoral and criminal activities" to respect the rule of law which safeguards and preserves human life and dignity, noting reports that "people are being maimed, killed, and denied decent burials."

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