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Zimbabwe Police Fire Teargas, Live Shots at MDC

By Reuters

HARARE — Zimbabwean riot squads fired teargas, live shots and water cannon to drive stone-throwing protesters off the streets of a troubled township in Harare on Sunday after preventing the main opposition party from holding a major rally.

The Movement for Democratic Change said police had arrested more than 120 MDC members while blocking the rally, which some government officials said was to mark the start of a foreign-backed challenge to its authority at a time of deepening economic crisis.

Armed police earlier sealed off the sports ground where the rally was to be held and arrested dozens of people, witnesses said, defying a court order to let the meeting go ahead.

The High Court ruled on Saturday that the government must allow the MDC to hold the rally, rejecting the police argument that they needed more time to find the manpower to monitor it.

State media suggested President Robert Mugabe was worried that the MDC wanted to use the event to launch a wave of anti-government protests.

Political tension is rising amid 80 percent unemployment, nearly 1,600 percent inflation, widespread poverty and food shortages. Many doctors, teachers and university lecturers are striking to press for higher wages.

Mugabe, Zimbabwe's ruler since independence from Britain in 1980, rejects blame for the crisis, saying domestic and Western opponents are sabotaging the economy to try to oust him.

On Sunday journalists saw riot police, some armed with rubber batons, guns and teargas launchers and some in armored trucks, converging on the Zimbabwe Grounds in the volatile Highfield township, arresting dozens of people who had begun to gather for the rally.

Stones and Batons

Violence erupted when small groups of MDC members tried to march to the sealed sports ground and some youths pelted police foot patrols with stones before being beaten away by baton-wielding officers.

The police also mounted roadblocks in the township, searching cars and questioning motorists.

Harare's state-controlled Sunday Mail said the planned MDC rally was part of a British-sponsored drive "to galvanise the regime change lobby" and embarrass Mugabe, who turns 83 this week and will celebrate with a huge party on Saturday.

"The MDC rally slated for this weekend was meant to provide impetus to the 'final-push' (massive street protest campaign)," the paper said, quoting unnamed government officials as accusing former colonial power Britain of trying to overthrow Mugabe.

MDC spokesman Nelson Chamisa said the party had not officially called off the rally, but accepted it could not take place because of the police action.

He said MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai had driven to the venue and tried in vain to persuade the police to let the rally go ahead. "We have not canceled the rally. It was canceled by the police in defiance of the court order," he said.

Tsvangirai stopped and talked to a group of MDC supporters during his brief trip to Highfield. "The president simply told them 'the struggle continues,'" Chamisa said.

Police spokesman Wayne Bvudzijena was not available for comment. But state radio said police had "stopped the rally for political reasons" and that details of people arrested and property destroyed were still being worked out.

MDC national organising secretary Elias Mudzuri said around 200 young people who had been on security duty at the Zimbabwe Grounds overnight had been attacked and either driven away or detained by the police.

The MDC had said it planned to use the rally to launch its presidential election campaign. The election is due in March 2008 but the ruling Zanu PF party plans to put it off until 2010 and to hold it at the same time as parliamentary elections.

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