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African Union Packs Aside Zimbabwe's Rights Report

By Staff Reporter

For eight consecutive years, Zimbabwe deliberately refused to submit its state party report on human rights to the Banjul-based African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR). In a surprising mood, Zimbabwe tabled its human rights before commissioners, who are currently attending the 40th session of the commission in the Gambian capital.

But according to news leaks from Banjul, the human rights commissioners - who described the report as "vehement and unapologetic", as Harare is on course to defend its appalling human rights records—decided to embargo the report from being discussed or criticised.

The Zimbabwe government had wished the report to be dealt with by the Banjul session but furious commissioners decided it should be kept for the 41st session, which takes place in July next year.

According to informed sources, there had been attempts to smuggle the late report to be among the agenda but commissioners detected the plan.

The report was embargoed to the press but some of its details had leaked. And according to sources in Banjul, the Zimbabwe government insists that the present economic crisis is caused by the sanctions imposed by the Western world. Consequently, it therefore argued that the violations of rights have been precipitated by the abnormal situation Harare authorities had faced.

The government of President Robert Mugabe has been grilled by Western countries for its frequent gross violations of the rights of its people, particularly its opponents who face torture, arbitrary arrests and detentions.

Zimbabwe bears the full brunt of its human rights abuses, alleged stealing of elections and the controversial seizure of white-owned farmland that were redistributed to the landless blacks. These actions prompted not only a floodgate of condemnations, but they also forced the European Union, United States, New Zealand, Australia, Switzerland, among others to impose economic and visa sanctions on President Mugabe and his senior officials.

Since 1998, Zimbabwe has refused to file its annual human rights reports to the continental commission, which forms part of the African Union (AU) structure. It is mandatory for African countries to submit their annual reports to the AU's commission for discussion and recommendation.

The Director of policy in Zimbabwe's Ministry of Justice, Margaret Chiduku, confirmed that her government had finally ended its snub of the African Commission, although she failed to explain why it took her country so long to act this way. "I am happy to report that we have submitted our combined state party report since 1998 to the ACHPR and we await to hear from the commissioners," she said.

Zimbabwean right activists stormed the Banjul session to submit dossiers of human rights abuses by their government. They made specific reference to the illegal detention and torture of the country's labour union leaders in September.

The legal officer of the Zimbabwe chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa, Wilbert Mandinde, welcomed Harare's submission of its combined state party reports since 1998. "The eight year delay is a cause for concern," Mr. Mandinde noted.

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