



# RIGHT2KNOW

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7 July 2016

**To: Hon. Maite Nkoana-Mashabane, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation**

**By email: minister@dirco.gov.za**

We write this letter as the Right2Know Campaign with deep concern at recent events in Zimbabwe, following protests and stay-aways prompted in part by high levels of poverty, wage disputes, corruption, and the heavy personal costs of the introduction of an imports and exports ban imposed by the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (Zimra).

On 6 July 2016, Zimbabweans across the spectrum embarked on a nationwide strike or stay-away which became known as #ZimShutDown2016. It was prompted by a number of incidents in Zimbabwe that had occurred in the preceding weeks and months.

The 6 July protest saw uprisings and stay aways on the streets of most urban centres, including Chitungwiza, Mutare, Bulawayo, Harare, Kwekwe, Gweru and Victoria Falls. In response to the protests, stay aways and strikes across Zimbabwe, we see a range of reports of gross human rights abuses including:

- Police brutality against protestors
- Police harassment and extortion of taxi drivers and the recently increased spot fines imposed at road blocks
- Arrests of protestors and journalists who were recording police abuses

**R2K National Working Group:** Alison Tilley, Asha Moodley, Cleopatra Shezi, Ghalib Galant, Godfrey Phiri, Meshack Mbangula, Mhlobo Gunguluzi, Nonhlanha Chanza, Percy Nhau, Philisiwe Dladla, Precious Mazibuko, Siviwe Mdoda

- An apparent localised 'shutdown' of the WhatsApp messaging service on the morning of 6 July 2016
- A public notice by the Zimbabwean telecommunications regulator, POTRAZ, to the effect that social media users suspected of distributing “subversive” messages will be identified, disconnected and “dealt with according to the national interest”.

The apparent suspension of WhatsApp services comes at a time when internet shutdowns are an increasingly common tactic by governments facing political crisis and citizen action. In 2015, global digital rights activists recorded 15 such shutdowns across the world. Between January and June 2016, there had been at least 20 such shutdowns. This is an unacceptable violation of citizens' right to free expression. We also note that the apparent suspension of WhatsApp in Zimbabwe on 6 July happens just days after South Africa opposed a United Nations Human Rights Council resolution that recognises people's right to internet access and online free speech.

The South African Constitution enshrines the right to privacy and free expression in its founding tenets. It is signatory to UN and AU covenants protecting the right to privacy and freedom of expression. It is therefore imperative that diplomatic channels be pursued to uphold the rule of law on the continent, and take all steps in its power to address the deteriorating political and socio-economic conditions in Zimbabwe and the region.

We call on you as Minister of International Relations and Cooperation to condemn these anti-democratic abuses and take all possible measures to pressure the Zimbabwean government to end these abuses and protect Zimbabweans' right to political participation, protest and dissent, in particular:

- Protection from police brutality, and punitive action against those police officers who have been brutalizing protestors.
- Protection from surveillance of activists and protest leaders
- Protection from internet shutdowns and protection for citizens' right to communicate.

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We request a response to this letter by 14 July 2016.

Murray Hunter

On behalf of the Right2Know Campaign

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