Tanzania: Brutal government clampdown on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba

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The Tanzanian government has carried out a brutal crackdown on its political opponents, involving the shooting of unarmed civilians. Human Rights Watch accused the Tanzanian security forces of going on the rampage and of using unrestrained force during recent demonstrations organised by the Civic United Front (CUF), the main opposition party in Zanzibar.

From January 26 to 28, riot police conducted a campaign of violence against peaceful demonstrations held on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, which lie off the coast of the Tanzanian mainland, as well as in the Tanzanian capital Dar es Salaam. The demonstrations were organised by the CUF to protest against the elections held last October on Zanzibar, in which the ruling political party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM — Party of the Revolution), took the majority of constituencies on the islands by means of widespread ballot rigging and intimidation. The CUF also condemned the ruling government's banning of demonstrations and public meetings as an attack on the democratic right of assembly.

Official figures for those killed in the demonstrations stand at 23, but unofficially the death toll is put at 75. The violence began with the arrest of CUF leaders who refused to comply with an order banning public meetings. Eyewitness reports from Zanzibar tell of police firing live rounds at unarmed demonstrators. Tanzania's notorious riot police, the Field Force Unit (FFU), began house-to-house searches across the islands, rounding up anyone suspected of being a CUF supporter. A curfew was imposed and many people were reported to have fled into the forest in fear of their lives.

Further reports state that boats used by those attempting to flee from the island were attacked by helicopter gunships and sunk. Over 1,000 people have fled to the Kenyan port of Shimoni where they are now living as refugees. They have given harrowing details to Kenyan television of police brutality and killings. One man, speaking from his hospital bed, described how the district commissioner on the island ordered the police to shoot unarmed civilians, "some died and we attempted to spirit away some of the wounded who could not receive treatment". The Tanzanian government had instructed all hospitals on the islands not to treat those injured in the violence. Fourteen CUF members of the Tanzanian parliament are among the refugees now living in Kenya.

The response from Western governments to the repression has been muted. Mrs Gun Britt Anderson, a European Union (EU) representative who was in Tanzania at the time, held a hastily convened press conference in Dar es Salaam. She said that due to the violence, the confidence of the international community towards Tanzania had "suffered a serious setback" and insisted that the Tanzanian government enter into dialogue with opposition forces. There has been no suggestion, however, that aid to Tanzania from the EU will be affected.

According to Kenya's *East African* newspaper, officials in Washington and at the US embassy in Dar es Salaam “expressed criticism of the government's handling of the demonstrations, but these rebukes have stopped short of threats of any punishment.” The US embassy spokesman also claimed the demonstrators bore responsibility for the killings: "Those who encouraged the demonstration were unable to restrain their supporters from carrying out acts of provocation and in some cases, attacks on the police."

The British authorities have not condemned the repression, and a trade mission to Dar es Salaam representing 21 British companies went ahead this

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month.

The brutality shown by the Tanzanian regime towards its opponents is a potential source of embarrassment to Western governments since they like to portray the country as a democratic success story. It adopted IMF/World Bank economic reform policies in 1986, and began holding multi-party elections in the 1990s.

The government of President Benjamin Mkapa remains committed to an IMF reform agenda, having opened up the economy to Western investors and privatised much of the state sector.

In order to deflect criticism of the police suppression, the government sent a multi-party commission to investigate what had happened on the island of Pemba, the scene of the worst violence. However, an opposition MP who took part said a “highly visible” police presence had prevented investigators being able to speak to ordinary people in the six hours they were there. President Mkapa, despite previous statements saying that CUF members were "terrorists" and should be "hunted down”, told all those who had fled the country that they were safe to return. A government announcement invited the refugees back to “restore the good name of Tanzania”, promising they could settle anywhere in the country. However this was contradicted when the prime minister told parliament that there were criminals amongst the refugees who would be arrested as soon as they returned.

The government's brutal suppression of demonstrations coincides with reports describing a "rush" by multinational companies to invest in the mining industry in Tanzania. A scramble has taken place involving Australian, British and Canadian companies over the exploration and extraction of an estimated 30 million ounces (933,000kg) of gold. Tanzania is set to produce one million ounces (31,000kg) of gold per year, worth $300 million. There have also been discoveries of substantial deposits of diamonds, coal, tin and other valuable minerals. Companies such as Anglo-American, Barrick Gold Corporation and Ashanti Goldfields are currently exploring and developing mines in the country.

The CUF's response to the killing of unarmed demonstrators was to call on the World Bank, the United Nations and the European Union to exert pressure on President Mkapa to force him to meet it and hear its demands. Whilst the CUF has been able to gain support amongst the population in Zanzibar—due to the hostility to government suppression as well as growing poverty resulting from the IMF measures—its demands for greater autonomy for Zanzibar represent the interests of a business elite on the islands. Given the growing importance of Tanzania's mineral wealth, overshadowing the economic attractions of Zanzibar with its clove plantations and tourist potential, the CUF will find little support in the West.

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