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## **Zimbabwe NGO Bill likely to restrict human rights operations**

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The Zimbabwean Parliament is currently debating the NGO Bill and is likely to vote in favour of the Bill on Tuesday (23 Nov), allowing for the promulgation into law of another piece of repressive legislation.

The Bill prevents international organisations from working explicitly on human rights and criminalizes the directors of local organisations if they accept foreign funding for work on human rights. In a collapsing economy which has experienced downward growth continuously in recent years, there is no possibility for human rights organisations to raise funds locally. The Bill effectively bans any work on human rights in Zimbabwe.

The human rights situation in Zimbabwe has deteriorated dramatically in recent years under the leadership of President Mugabe. Food has been denied to people who are not members of the rule ZANU-PF party and supporters of the opposition parties have been intimidated, attacked and killed. People who do not demonstrate their loyalty to the ruling party can expect to be subjected to some form of human rights abuse, perpetrated by the ruling party or with their tacit support.

The Bill also provides the Government with direct and excessive control over all NGOs. The Bill will increase the Government representation on the NGO Council, require NGOs to re-apply annually for registration and requires each NGO to submit a three year activity plan when applying for registration. As with other pieces of legislation promulgated into law in recent years, this Bill will give Government absolute authority, subject NGOs to political discretion and will be eventually used to ban those who do not demonstrate their political loyalty.

In recent weeks, women marching the five hundred kilometres from Bullawayo (the country's second city) to Harare in protest against the NGO Bill were arrested and detained by police. Last week during parliamentary debates on the NGO Bill, members of the National Constitutional Assembly organisation who were demonstrating peacefully outside parliament were arrested and detained by police. The country is facing major food shortages again over the coming months, despite the Government's refusal to allow the United Nations and other humanitarian organisations continue food aid programmes. It is widely believed that the ruling party are monopolising the supply of food in the run up to the parliamentary elections due in March 2005.