

House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing  
on  
IMPRISONED WRITERS

Monday, November 14, 2022 – 1:30 p.m.  
2255 Rayburn House Office Building and Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Statement of Tsitsi Dangarembga

My story begins, or at least the major part, is the 31st of July 2020 when I was arrested for walking down the street with a friend bearing a couple of posters asking for journalists to be freed and for institutional reform in Zimbabwe and for a better life for all Zimbabweans. The background to that is that we had had a coup in 2017. The situation up until 2017 had been increasingly repressive. With the coup, the situation deteriorated even more. Our president is on record as having said that they are the military, they are the police, they are everything. They determine who can mine, who can build a road there, everything. So this was the kind of situation that persisted after the coup in spite of the fact that the government was saying it was open for business. I'm not sure how those two things were to be reconciled. In order to legitimize the coup, we had an election in 2018. The results of that election were disputed. Some members of the opposition went out into the streets to demonstrate, and the army came out and killed at least six people. The figure could be higher. There was a commission that the government instituted to investigate that, but as far as I know, none of the recommendations whatsoever have been implemented, and in fact, some of those who testified at that commission were targeted. Meanwhile, the situation in Zimbabwe has continued to deteriorate. It came to the point where people began to call for a demonstration in 2020. It was a particular of a small opposition party, the leader of it, who called for a demonstration to commemorate what had happened in 2018 because things had not improved over the two years. I was very much in support of that demonstration, and so on social media where most of our engagement takes place given the rules we have with respect to media and association, I was very vocal in support of it. I think that the government became quite worried about the effect that that demonstration could have, because a few days before the demonstration, a message was sent out that the demonstration had been banned. It was a ban by decree. It had not gone through parliament, it was not a statutory instrument. I found myself in the situation of either giving in to such decrees that happened whenever somebody in high places felt like it or upholding my constitutional right as a Zimbabwean to protest peacefully. A friend and I decided we were going to go out and continue with our protest, which is what we did. We walked down the road with our posters and stood at the intersection. After a little while, we saw a white vehicle coming down the road, and it stopped. We were told that what we were doing was illegal. I asked exactly what was illegal. I was not answered and was simply told once again that it was illegal and that I had to get into the vehicle with my friend. I did that. We were taken to our local police station. The situation in Zimbabwe is that when you arrive to the police station, you are made to sit on the floor behind the desk. That's just how things are done at that police station. We sat on the floor for a couple of

hours. It was cold so we sat on our posters, but then they came to ask for our posters for evidence. We could see them going up and down, and we didn't know what was going on. Then we were told we were being transferred to another police station, the central police station, in the center of the city. When we got there, we were finally charged with attending a meeting with an intent to incite public violence, breach of the peace, or acts of bigotry. We were sent down to the cells, and in the cells, we met several other people who had been arrested for demonstrating on that day. Later on, two young men came in. They said they had been demonstrating in another part of the city. They had been arrested, hoods had been put over their heads. They had been taken out to a place out of town and they had been beaten repeatedly and asked who was paying them. When they came in, they had bruises all over them. They were bleeding. One of them had a hanging shoulder, the other one's leg was dragging. They had no food, they had absolutely nothing. Fortunately, I had some painkillers and was able to give them some painkillers. We have an organization called Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights who take up cases like that. They came and took our case. The next day we were told we were going to be charged with another offense which was contravening COVID guidelines or regulations, because that was during the COVID time. We went to court thinking we were going to go to prison, because we had actually been told we were going to prison. At the last minute, we were told we would be out on bail. It seemed as though everything was going to proceed in a fair and just manner. Our bail consisted of handing over our passports and reporting once a week to the station, which was a drag but at least we were out of jail. Our people, the friends that we had been protesting about, journalists and politicians, were recently in jail. That went on until about the middle of 2021 when at some point I had asked for my bail conditions to be relaxed. When I came back, the magistrate who had agreed to relax my bail restrictions was no longer on my case. I heard that things did not go well for her after that. We had a series of magistrates after that, and the situation just got worse and worse. They continued to delay. It took nearly two years to go to trial, because the court kept saying they were not ready. Eventually they had three witnesses who were all the policemen who had arrested us from the same van of policemen who had arrested us. There were about 20 of them in there. They found a way of eventually finding us guilty. As it stands, I am a convict. Fortunately, it was a suspended sentence, so I sit here with a suspended six-month jail sentence for five years. If I do anything similar, to which could be saying anything or tweeting things that seem to be insightful of violence, I could find myself back facing it again. That is my story, but it is only part of the oppression that is increasing in Zimbabwe.