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Rights groups express outrage at state persecution of Zimbabwean activists

Civil Society organisations, including Global Witness, Human Rights Watch, and Partnership Africa Canada, today condemned the state-sponsored harassment and intimidation of a Zimbabwean non-governmental organisation, the Centre for Research and Development (CRD), which has been instrumental in exposing ongoing human rights abuses in Zimbabwe's notorious Marange diamond fields.

On Thursday May 27, the home of CRD's director, Farai Maguwu, was raided by Zimbabwean Central Intelligence Organisation agents. They confiscated documents and equipment, and arrested Mr Maguwu's nephew, Lisbern Maguwu. Farai Maguwu and other CRD staff have been in hiding since the raid, and lawyers attempting to gain access to Lisbern Maguwu have been interrogated and threatened by police. The raid came just days after Farai Maguwu had met with Abbey Chikane, the monitor appointed by the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS), who was in Zimbabwe to assess the country's compliance with a series of requirements that were imposed in November 2009.

"This is the latest in a series of attempts by the Zimbabwean authorities to intimidate Centre for Research and Development representatives, and stop them from investigating and publicising ongoing abuses in the Marange diamond fields," said Bernard Taylor of Partnership Africa Canada. "Such harassment is wholly unacceptable and must stop."

The Centre for Research and Development is a member of the Kimberley Process Civil Society Coalition, an official observer of the international scheme. The Kimberley Process is a rough diamond certification scheme that seeks to eradicate the trade in conflict diamonds, responsible for fuelling brutal conflicts in the past. The CRD has played a central role in recording human rights abuses carried out by state security agents against local people in the Marange diamond fields, and has frequently made this information available to Kimberley Process participant governments and working groups.

A number of prominent organisations, including Global Witness, Partnership Africa Canada, and Human Rights Watch have documented grave human rights abuses in Marange and have called on Kimberley Process member states to suspend Zimbabwe from the scheme, halt the export of its stones, and broaden the mandate of the KP to include human rights violations committed by governments.

Over the past two years, hundreds of informal diamond panners have been killed in eastern Zimbabwe by units of the Zimbabwean army and police, which have also been intimately involved in the illicit exploitation and smuggling of diamonds from Marange. Kimberley Process participant countries have so far failed to reach consensus on suspending Zimbabwe from membership. In November 2009, a compromise action plan was agreed upon by the KP and Zimbabwe, but evidence, including the raid on CRD,

suggests that, while Zimbabwe might have addressed some technical concerns, the human rights situation on the ground has not improved.

“Kimberley Process member governments – and Abbey Chikane – must denounce this persecution and Zimbabwe’s blatant disregard for the Kimberley Process’ core principles,” said Elly Harrowell of Global Witness. “Instead of working to bring the country’s diamond sector into line with international standards, Zimbabwean officials have chosen to target rights groups for investigating and publicising problems in the diamond sector.”

Civil society groups are calling upon Kimberley Process members to suspend the monitoring arrangement provided for under the November work plan, until Zimbabwean authorities give concrete assurances that people who provide information to the KP will not be persecuted and harassed by the state security agencies for their actions. Until this happens, and Zimbabwe complies with all Kimberley Process requirements, consumers cannot be confident of buying diamonds that are free from the taint of human rights abuses.

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The following organisations are signatories to this statement: Partnership Africa Canada, GAERN (Democratic Republic of Congo), Green Advocates (Liberia), Human Rights Watch, Fatal Transactions, GRPIE (Côte d’Ivoire), Global Witness, Zimbabwe Europe Network.