



NATIONAL
TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE
WORKING GROUP
ZIMBABWE

NPRCWATCH

Safeguarding the Ethos of Truth-telling and Truth-seeking in Zimbabwe Press Statement on the International Day for the Right to Truth concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and the Dignity of Victims, 2020

On 21 December 2010, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 24 March as the International Day for the Right to the Truth concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims. Internationally, this annual observance pays tribute to the memory of Archbishop Monsignor Óscar Arnulfo Romero, who was murdered on 24 March 1980 for his role in denouncing human rights violations perpetrated on the most vulnerable people in El Salvador. On 24 March 2020, the National Transitional Justice Working Group (NTJWG) joined the world in commemorating this important day. The vision and mission of the NTJWG is to enable communities in Zimbabwe that have been torn apart by violence to recover and to empower individuals – victims, witnesses and perpetrators – to recount their experiences and agree on measures of justice to inform the future.

According to the United Nations, the right to truth is “closely linked with other rights and has both an individual and a societal dimension and should be considered as a non-derogable right and not be subject to limitations”. Truth-telling and truth-seeking are two necessary steps needed for justice and accountability to be achieved, both preconditions for the restoration of the dignity of victims and survivors of human rights atrocities. For a country that has faced continuous cycles of violence dating back to the pre-independence era, the dire need for truth-telling in Zimbabwe can never be over-emphasised.

Atrocities continue to this day, fuelled in part by a culture of impunity that is perpetuated by subduing truth-telling. This year's commemoration comes at a time when the nation is demanding justice and accountability for the victims of the 1 August 2018 and the January 2019 state-perpetrated human rights violations in response to the public display of disgruntlement over legitimate concerns, and in the exercise by the people of their constitutional freedoms. The commemorations also come at a time when the NTJWG pays tribute to the legacy of activists such as Itai Dzamara who was abducted five years ago on 9 March 2015 in Harare for speaking truth to power and urging the Government of Zimbabwe to be accountable. The NTJWG, as with other compatriots who believe in the power of truth, continues to search for answers and demand justice and accountability for the abduction of Itai Dzamara and many who have been abducted before and after him. Many continue the search for their loved ones who went missing. To date, very few investigations have been conducted with limited repercussions for the perpetrators.

In Zimbabwe, there is need to entrench “the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation”, as the UN Secretary General has stated, and truth-telling occupies a central position in that endeavour. In this light, the NTJWG insists that victims and survivors of gross human rights violations must have full and non-discriminatory access to effective remedies and justice. Truth-telling and truth-seeking processes in Zimbabwe will ensure that the horrors of the past are not repeated, allowing both perpetrators and survivors to move into a future of justice and peace.

This year's commemoration of the International Day of Truth coincides with the ongoing attempts by the government to conduct exhumations in Matabeleland, a sensitive subject for all Zimbabweans insofar as uncovering the truth on the Gukuruhundi atrocities is concerned. Exhumations are an important component of truth-telling and truth-seeking. As such, the NTJWG maintains that uncovering the truth through exhumations call for an inclusive, participatory and thorough process that is guided by pre-determined and agreed upon standards that preserve the integrity of the process and the evidence, so that the need for closure is balanced with the need to unearth what happened and ensure justice for purposes of true national healing for posterity, beyond individuals concerned. The truth needs to be uncovered and confronted and dealt with for Zimbabwe to move forward and break the cycle of violence, and not be white-washed through wishing the atrocities away by saying “let bygones be bygones”. Bones must be given an opportunity to speak for themselves, and survivors and families of victims deserve the opportunity to claim justice, while perpetrators also need a platform to tell the truth as part of their own healing. Zimbabwe cannot move into the future without confronting its past.

To that end, the NTJWG calls on the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) to expedite truth-telling and truth-seeking processes in terms of its mandate under section 252 of the Constitution. Dialogue is essential and must be a central part of that process, cognisant that the pursuit of truth is not an event, but rather a process. The NTJWG reiterates the need for a national strategy on truth-telling and truth-seeking as paramount to the attainment of true transitional justice and a true break from the past in Zimbabwe, marked by sustainable peace and non-recurrence.