

Zimbabwe: Govt blocks internet amid police crackdown

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This morning, an activist in Zimbabwe's capital, Harare, called to say that the authorities have done the unthinkable and unprecedented: blocked internet access and WhatsApp text messaging to obstruct people protesting traffic police corruption, widespread poverty, and lack of jobs. "Please tell the world that we have been shut down," she said.



Source: The Herald/AllAfrica

The Zimbabwean government's brazen internet blockade, which lasted for several hours, comes just days after the United Nations Human Rights Council issued a resolution on the protection of rights online and called on countries to refrain from disrupting Internet service.

Originally peaceful protests in Zimbabwe turned violent this week, with protesters blocking roads, stoning vehicles, and physically assaulting the police. The local media and social media platforms have been awash with images of anti-riot police cracking down on hundreds of demonstrators in Harare with water cannons, teargas, and batons. At least 50 protesters have been injured, and many arrested.

At least one police officer is reported to have died after being attacked by a group of protesters. Activists, trade union leaders, and opposition parties have said they will intensify the protests until Zimbabwe "shuts down." They should also speak out strongly against protesters using violence.

Many fear the police may use the violence as a pretext to ratchet up their use of force, including lethal force. On Monday, the police warned they would deal with violent protesters "severely." The police have a duty to maintain public order and protect life and property. However, international standards provide that law-enforcement officers use nonviolent means before resorting to force, which should only be used in proportion to the seriousness of the offense and to achieve a legitimate aim. Lethal force should only be used when necessary to protect life.

The chilling images of police beatings are a reminder of the country's ugly past of heavy-handed police action against largely peaceful protesters. As Human Rights Watch investigations in the past have shown, police abuses and partisanship have contributed heavily to Zimbabwe's disastrous human rights situation.

Zimbabwe's authorities should transparently and fairly investigate police brutality and discipline or prosecute those responsible. The country's constitution establishes an independent body to investigate complaints of police and military

misconduct, but the government has yet to set it up.

Blocking the internet will not resolve the country's problems. Neither will police abuses. The authorities need to make a clean break with the country's violent past: they should allow peaceful protests, respond appropriately if protests turn violent, and hold all those who violate the law to account. Then it will be up to the government to engage the protesters' concerns.

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