



'They failed to break my spirit' says freed rights campaigner

Jestina Mukoko talks about her experience of abduction by secret police in Zimbabwe to MARY FITZGERALD, Foreign Affairs Correspondent

A YEAR ago this week, Jestina Mukoko was spirited away from her home before dawn by members of Zimbabwe's secret police. It was the beginning of an ordeal Ms Mukoko, a leading human rights campaigner, knew had become only too common for anyone who dared question the status quo in Zimbabwe. Nothing was known of her whereabouts until she appeared in court on terrorism charges almost a month later.

Those charges, which prompted outrage across the world, were eventually thrown out in September after a court ruled Ms Mukoko had been tortured while in custody. She had been subjected to simulated drowning, locked in a freezer and given beatings to force her to confess to plotting to oust Robert Mugabe.

Ms Mukoko's plight drew much attention in Ireland, given her long-standing links with Trócaire, and the fact that she had met Oireachtas members while visiting Dublin last year. "I deeply appreciate the fact that my friends in Ireland at every level believed in me and at no time doubted my innocence," she told an Oireachtas committee this week.

She recalled how she remained defiant even during the darkest days of her detention. "They failed to break my spirit and I even remember telling my interrogators that I am not a supporter of any political party but a defender who has a passion for human rights."

Nevertheless, her abduction and incarceration continue to cast a shadow. "Since my release, I have tried to be very careful . . . I have been able to continue with my work but the fear is still there at the back of my mind," she says. "I cannot help being afraid, especially when I spot the kind of vehicle that took me from my home. The experience was harrowing and it is something I would not want to go through again."

But it has not deterred her from her work with the Zimbabwe Peace Project. "As a human rights defender, I want to continue to work for the majority of Zimbabweans who cannot speak for themselves. I was lucky enough that voices were raised on my behalf, but not every Zimbabwean is so lucky."

She fears her ordeal could be used to instil fear in others: "As a high-profile woman, I was abducted and I think they are going to tell people if we could do it to Jestina, what would stop us from doing it to you."

Assessing the current political situation in Zimbabwe, Ms Mukoko says she is quite optimistic, but warns of a creeping stagnation as the unity government formed in February continues to limp. "The inclusive government is something we never thought would happen in Zimbabwe. It is historic and we wish to give it a chance. But I think it demands the participation of all Zimbabweans, and the principals themselves need to follow the Global Political Agreement to the letter," she says. "Initial steps have been taken, but there already seems to have been some

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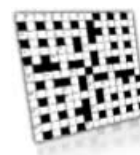
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stagnation."

The human rights situation remains abysmal. "We are still very concerned about the huge amount of human rights abuses that continue to be recorded, and the harassment and arrest of civil society leaders," she says. "The ones that cause me the most worry are the abductions, the unlawful detentions and the torture cases . . . Fear is being instilled in a lot of communities and that is a big worry . . . I am afraid that, while in some respects we are taking positive steps forward, there seems to be a constant moving backwards too."



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
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