

Zimbabwean archbishop in hiding after threats from state security agents

The outspoken Roman Catholic Archbishop Pius Ncube of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, says he is living in fear following threats made two weeks ago by state security agents.

"I am now afraid and am now living in different houses," Ncube told the weekly Financial Gazette newspaper from an undisclosed location. Ncube, who has often criticised the government of President Robert Mugabe, said he had been warned by the agents to stop "politicising" his church sermons.

He said two operatives from the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), Zimbabwe's state security service, confronted him after a prayer meeting in Bulawayo on 27 February at which church leaders heard accounts of torture and politically motivated violence.

The meeting had also been attended by a delegation from South Africa led by Anglican Bishop Rubin Philip from KwaZulu-Natal.

Those who spoke at the gathering included an opposition member of parliament and graduates from Zimbabwe's national youth training service camps, which critics charge are training a youth militia for the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) party.

Job Sikhala, a member of parliament for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, said he had been picked up from his home in January and taken to a secret location where he was tortured by security police who accused him of plotting to overthrow the government. He said he was stripped naked and had electric shocks applied to his toes and tongue.

A 21-year-old woman told the meeting about her experiences in a national youth training service camp where, she alleged, male trainees took turns raping young women. The woman said she was HIV-positive and had a baby as a result of repeated rape.

Ncube said the state security agents had tried to arrest him immediately after the prayer meeting but failed because fellow church ministers, including members of the South African delegation, intervened.

Agents returned the following day, Ncube said.

"They told me they were not happy with some of my preaching, especially the church service on [27 February]," Ncube said.

Ncube has been publicly criticised in recent years by various government officials, including President Robert Mugabe, himself a Roman Catholic. Mugabe accused the archbishop of leading a crusade in the Matabeleland province against ZANU-PF ahead of the country's parliamentary election in the year 2000.

The Financial Gazette said the Zimbabwean government had denied the allegations of torture and sexual abuse.

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