PRESS STATEMENT

HRDC CONDEMNS THE UNDRESSING, BEATING AND HUMILIATION OF A POLICEWOMAN IN LILONGWE, THE SHOOTING OF UNARMED PROTESTERS, AND THE WIDESPREAD LOOTING, VANDALISM AND OTHER ACTS OF VIOLENCE THAT OCCURRED DURING AND AFTER TUESDAY’S MEGA DEMONSTRATIONS

The Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) expresses strongest condemnation of the horrendous incidents of violence that occurred on Tuesday in some cities, including the undressing, beating and public humiliation of a female police officer in Lilongwe, and the widespread looting, arson and vandalism of private and public property.

At the same time, the HRDC condemns in no uncertain terms the Police, especially in Lilongwe, for deploying violent tactics in trying to disperse peaceful demonstrators. The HRDC particularly condemns the use of live bullets by police in Lilongwe, which resulted in one protester being shot.

The HRDC understands that at around 8am on Tuesday 6th August 2019, thousands of unarmed protesters had peacefully gathered at the Lilongwe Community Centre Ground to kick-start their march to Capital Hill. However, clashes broke out a few minutes later when police officers used teargas against unarmed protesters, triggering a violent reaction from the protesters. In response, some angry protesters began pelting stones at the violent police officers, resulting in a two hour-long standoff and escalating tension.

In the tension that ensued, some protesters lost their minds and set on fire a police riot vehicle (locally known as chimbeula) and a house belonging to a police officer. Others went into a frenzy and started chasing police officers. Local television footage showed a female police officer being chased and manhandled by a group of protesters. In another footage that was circulating on social media, a female police officer appeared to have been undressed, assaulted and was being paraded almost naked in full view of cameras.
As HRDC, we condemn these events in no uncertain terms and urge the law enforcers to track down those responsible and hold them accountable.

The HRDC applauds police officers in Mzuzu and Blantyre cities who behaved very professionally, resulting in peaceful demonstrations. This proves what we have been saying all along that it is police officers, and not protesters, who incite violence. It is unfortunate that some of our Police officers, sometimes, behave like a violent gang that wants to assert its authority, and as a result, protesters end up reacting violently.

The HRDC strongly believes that the recent violent behaviour by police officers in Lilongwe was a direct result of statements made by the police hierarchy. Prior to the demonstrations, Police Inspector General (IG), Rodney Jose, had warned that riot police would be deployed in all the streets of Blantyre, Mzuzu and Lilongwe cities on Wednesday and Tuesday. In a letter we have seen and which was quoted by various media houses, the IG further warned that Police would use all force “as is necessary to deal with the demonstrations” because the demonstrations were deemed illegal as the HRDC “had not received permission from authorities or the Police”\(^1\).

As HRDC, we are perturbed by the Police’s continued misinterpretation of the law. Our laws are clear that protesters do not need approval from the police or the councils to hold demonstrations. The Police Act only requires a written notification to be sent to the Police and councils of the intended demonstrations. Unfortunately, it is this gross misunderstanding of the law by police authorities that is causing all these problems.

We urge the law enforcers to stop misinterpreting the law to suit their own interests. The HRDC emphasizes that the freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are rights guaranteed in the Constitution of Malawi and shall not be prejudiced under any pretext. In this regard, the HRDC calls upon the Attorney General to open a serious investigation into these unfortunate incidents and bring the perpetrators to justice. We further urge relevant authorities to investigate and discipline all police officers who behaved unprofessionally by attacking peaceful protesters during the demonstrations.

The HRDC also calls upon competent authorities to take the necessary measures to stop such violations and respect civilians’ public freedoms that are guaranteed constitutionally and according to the international human rights standards to which Malawi has subscribed. The HRDC also urges the Ministry of Homeland Security to take the necessary measures to prevent recurrence of such illegal conduct by law enforcers in the future.

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Police officers must consider their actions carefully before taking unreasonable action like teargassing, chasing or beating up unarmed protesters.

Finally yet importantly, the HRDC commends the Malawian Defense Force (MDF) soldiers for the exemplary role they played in restoring law and order. Without their intervention, it would not have been possible for the millions of Malawians to march and deliver their petition. The HRDC also expresses deep gratitude to the multitude of people who turned out to march peacefully in all the three cities of the country. Through these mega demonstrations, Malawians have demonstrated that their love for the country endures and that they will do anything, legally permissible, to defend their hard won democracy.

*Down with the spirit of fear;*

*Down with oppression;*

*Long Live Genuine Democracy!*

Signed by:

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