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AIDS activists detained by Tanzanian Authorities at World Economic Forum on Africa

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This is a press statement from our partner organization, the AIDS Rights Alliance of Southern Africa (ARASA), endorsed by the Treatment Action Campaign.

Thursday 6 May, Windhoek -- On Wednesday 5 May, the opening day of the World Economic Forum on Africa (WEF) in Dar Es Salaam, a group of nine AIDS activists from across the continent were detained for questioning by Tanzanian authorities after they handed over a memorandum entitled ?Health is Wealth?, which emphasised the need for increased investment in health and particularly HIV, TB and Malaria in Africa, to two prominent speakers at the WEF.

Yvonne Chaka Chaka, a popular South African musician and UN Goodwill Ambassador for the region, and Christoph Benn, the Director of External Relations for the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, had arranged with the group to receive the memorandum from them outside the conference centre.

The small group had been delegated by 40 NGO representatives from more than ten African countries, who were gathered in Dar Es Salaam to discuss global and regional advocacy strategies to address the urgent need for resource mobilization for universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care (universal access), and for replenishment of the Global Fund in October 2010.

One such strategy included the submission of a memorandum to participants of the World Economic Forum, which outlined the concerns and demands of civil society organizations working on HIV and TB in response to the rapid backtracking of both donors and national governments on their commitments to funding universal access.

The group had chosen the WEF as a focal point for advocacy because of the inextricable links between health and socio-economic development. As mentioned in the memorandum, African heads of state, in the Abuja Declaration of 2001, stated that HIV, TB and other infectious diseases ?constitute not only a major health crisis, but also ?the greatest global threat to the survival and life expectancy of African peoples, [and] a devastating economic burden, through the loss of human capital, [and] reduced productivity...?

In calling on global leaders to mobilize at least US$20 billion for the Global Fund replenishment in October 2010, the memorandum also pointed out that, as warned by the World Bank, ?responding to immediate fiscal pressure by reducing spending on HIV treatment and prevention will reverse recent gains and require costly offsetting measures over the longer term?.

The memorandum was originally intended to be handed over at a peaceful march with around 800 supporters, largely from Tanzanian community groups. However, the march was cancelled the night before, after the government revoked the permit to demonstrate.

Following the handing-over of the memorandum to Chaka Chaka and Benn outside the WEF, which lasted no longer than 15 minutes and caused no disruption to the conference activities, the group had boarded their bus and were preparing to return to their hotel when they were detained by police and taken to the police station for questioning. They were held for five hours, although ultimately no charges were issued or arrests made.

The group was then escorted under heavy security back to their hotel, where they were instructed to gather their luggage and proceed to the airport to wait through the night, under police supervision, until their flights departed from the country the following day. Although no formal ?Prohibited Immigrant? notices were issued, members of the group were effectively treated as such and one member, who had planned to extend his stay by a few days, was compelled to accompany the group to the airport on standby for the next available flight.

Michaela Clayton, Director of the AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa expressed her concern about these actions on the part of the Tanzanian authorities, ?which display a complete disregard for the right to freedom of expression in respect of the conveyance of a message as critical as this. Unless donors and national governments make more resources available there will be no universal access?.

Those detained were: Paula Akugizibwe and Lynette Mabote from the AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa; Bactrin Killingo, James Kayo and Netsayi Dzinoreva from the International Treatment Preparedness Coalition; Linda Mafu and Soraya Matthews from the World AIDS Campaign; Sydney Hushie from the Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS; and Michael O?Connor from the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria. All have now left Tanzania.

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