

Trails of enforced disappearances haunting Zimbabwe

Southern African country still contending with enforced disappearances four decades after gaining independence from colonial rule

Anadolu Agency, Turkey, by Jeffrey Moyo in Zimbabwe

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NKAYI, Zimbabwe: In 1983, 27-year-old Menzisi Nyathi disappeared from his home, never to be seen again since that time when Zimbabwe's 1980s genocide [known as the [Gukurahundi](#)* massacres] swept across the Matabeleland and Midlands regions.

Now, Thandi – his 46-year-old daughter, who was only six years old when her father was seized from their homestead – still nurses scant memories of the sad event.

Abductions since 1980s

"I remember we were sitting around the fire in the evening back in 1983 when armed government soldiers stormed our home and took my father away, and since then, we have never seen nor heard about his whereabouts," Thandi told Anadolu Agency.

Annual commemorations of the UN's Aug. 30 International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances have only helped reopen old wounds for many victims of enforced disappearances like Thandi.

“I grew up without a father because he was made to disappear without a trace, and my mother had to play a new role as the breadwinner for years as we were growing up with my four siblings,” she said.

For 42-year-old Pieta Kaseke, a well-known political activist with the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in Zimbabwe who is unmarried and childless, it never rains, but pours.

She was abducted on October 31, 2008 by police officers whom she said handed her over to the country’s dreaded central intelligence officers who subjected her to further unlawful detention and torture.

Opposition activists targeted

Together with several other MDC activists back then, Kaseke faced charges of banditry, sabotage and terrorism.

For her, commemorations for the disappeared only reopen old wounds.

“The world commemorations of the disappearances day sicken me because it brings back memories of the torture I went through at the hands of police and secret state operatives when I was abducted in 2008,” she said.

Even though Kaseke sued authorities here for \$1.2 million, she has very little to show for it as she was only given \$800.

Journalists not spared by abductions

Zimbabwe’s journalists have also over the years not been spared from enforced disappearances.

In March 2015, 35-year-old journalist Itai Dzamara was seized by unidentified assailants while he was getting a haircut at a barbershop near his home in the Glenview suburb of the capital Harare.

Tawanda Muchehiwa, a journalism student at Zimbabwe’s Midlands State University, was kidnapped by suspected state operatives on July 30, 2020 and tortured for three days after his captors accused him of plotting to lead anti-government protests scheduled for July 31.

Muchehiwa is the nephew of Mduduzi Mathuthu, the editor of Zimlive, an online independent newspaper there.

Families of abductees suffer trauma

Now families of disappeared journalists like Dzamara still nurse their emotional wounds following the unexplained disappearances of their loved ones.

“As a family, we will continue to seek closure to what happened to Itai. It is something which is and will always be of high concern to us till there is closure,” said Paddy Dzamara, Itai’s brother.

For Shefra, Itai's wife, who apparently does not know whether to identify herself as a widow since her husband's disappearance six years ago, contending with sorrow has become a trend for her.

"My message on this day is that we will not forget Itai and we pray that we get answers and we hope the government will help us find him or to get his abductors. Life without him is hard. Imagine living for six years without knowing where he is or what happened to him," she said.

What crosses the minds of many like Earnest Mudzengi, the director of Media Center Zimbabwe, amid the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances is the need to end torture and guarantee the right to life and freedom of association and movement.

Yet for Rashweat Mukundu of International Media Support, disappearances have continued unabated.

"There is still a lot of impunity regarding forced disappearance in Zimbabwe, and the sad part is that there is all evidence that state agents and institutions are involved," said Mukundu.

"We know in the past that the intelligence organizations, the military and the police have been involved in abductions judging by the cases that have gone before the courts.

"To me, the biggest perpetrator of forced disappearance in Zimbabwe is the state, and there is a lot of impunity around this matter that we need to deal with. There is a need to reflect a little bit more on this matter so that action is taken, demands are made on authorities so that they act to nip disappearances in the bud," he added.

Such are the disappearances of member of parliament Joanna Mamombe, Cecilia Chimбири and Netsai Marova two years ago, who have gone on record in the media claiming that following their abduction, they were sexually abused and forced to drink their own urine.

The three women, all activists from the opposition MDC, disappeared then after being detained by police in Harare while on their way to an anti-government protest in Harare.

Henry Chimбири said his daughter's abduction left his entire family shaken, and to this day, they are still traumatized.

"My experience is very disheartening. My family is suffering from psychological torture. When my daughter was abducted by state security agents, we could not stomach the situation of having to go for more than 48 hours without traces of her whereabouts. We lost the appetite for food – my wife and I – and we could not sleep. It is stressful and health-straining to have your child abused and tortured by people who are supposed to protect her," he said.

Lasting emotional scars

Jestina Mukoko, director for the Zimbabwe Peace Project, a non-governmental human rights organization, said enforced disappearances affect the victims and their families negatively and it is a scar they will live with.

“It is inhumane and degrading to subject citizens to enforced disappearance, especially for a nation that aspires to be democratic. This is one crime that has transcended colonial time and is a practice Zimbabwe is failing to shake off,” said Mukoko.

According to the UN, 49 cases of abductions and torture were reported in Zimbabwe in 2019 alone.

It was that year that 38-year-old human rights activist Tatenda Mombeyarara, seized from his Harare home by heavily armed men in August, found himself listed in this country’s abduction statistics.

Pounding him with rods when they abducted him, Mombeyarara’s attackers accused him of being involved in organizing anti-government protests.

*Gukurahundi: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gukurahundi>

<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/trails-of-enforced-disappearances-haunting-zimbabwe/2348747>