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presentation as presented for delivery  
26th Annual Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award  
November 13, 2009  
The White House, Washington, DC

Good evening Mr. President, Mrs. Obama, members of Congress and the diplomatic corps, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great honour to be standing here accepting this award tonight and I thank you. The accolade of winning the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award should be a cause for great celebration. Yet, I find that even as I stand here, humbled and grateful, for the recognition, I find little to celebrate.

The Global Political Agreement signed in September of last year should also have been a cause for celebration. This agreement brokered by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) was to be a foundation for dialogue and cooperation between political parties. A year later, however, we find ourselves in a situation of great uncertainty and violence.

Human rights defenders continue to be targeted for arbitrary arrest, harassment, torture and abduction by state agents. Oppressive laws designed to silence democratic voices are still in place and still being used against us. My colleague, Jenni Williams, and I return to court on 7 December, facing charges of disturbing the peace for saying that people need food aid. We are facing five years in prison.

This harassment is also visited upon ordinary citizens. A badly paid police force routinely solicits bribes from people going about their business. Innocent people are arrested for loitering and vendors often have their goods looted for the personal use of police.

The economy has also not recovered enough to bring relief to the average household. We see food on supermarket shelves, but we cannot eat with our eyes. Unemployment remains at close to 95%, and with informal trade criminalised, most people remain locked in a daily struggle to feed themselves and their families.

The healthcare and education systems remain in crisis. While some schools have reopened, more and more children are dropping out as parents continue with the daily struggle to decide whether to put food on the table for the day or send a child to school for a week. Child-headed households are also becoming increasingly prevalent as HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, stress and a collapsed healthcare system combine to hound our people into early graves. In Zimbabwe, the average life expectancy for a woman is 34 years.

This is the backdrop against which WOZA operates, providing Zimbabweans across political lines with a platform to speak out about their issues. Almost every month for the last seven years, women and men have taken to the streets to demand social justice and hold their leaders accountable through peaceful direct action. Invariably these peaceful protests have led to conflict with the state.

Thousands of my colleagues have faced arrest, torture and abduction – their only crime, wanting a better life for themselves and their families. I myself have been arrested more than 30 times in the last seven years for peaceful actions. Once, I was even arrested for teaching women how to make lemon jam!

These arrests do not deter us because WOZA has empowered us to believe that we deserve better. We deserve to have a roof over our head, food in our stomachs, our children in schools and the nation working. We deserve to live in dignity and free from fear; and it is our right to have our voices heard and respected. That is why I joined WOZA. While Mugabe boasts of having degrees in violence, I and 75,000 WOZA members who stand beside me, have degrees in non-violence.

Our aim is to uphold universality and nonviolence, for a better life—for ourselves and for our children. The Robert F Kennedy award not only validates WOZA's work, it amplifies our voices. Your efforts send the message that we are not alone and that the world is watching.

I would like to appeal to my sisters and brothers from Africa, guarantors to the Global Political Agreement (GPA). Since it was signed last September, there have been thousands of violations. We call on SADC and all friends present to ensure that the spirit and the letter of the GPA are fully respected and implemented.

We appeal to you to help us rebuild our healthcare and education systems and ensure that every person has enough to eat. We are not asking you to solve our problems for us. We are asking you to support our choices and help us implement them.

In the words of Robert F. Kennedy, "The future is not a gift: it is an achievement. Every generation helps make its own future." Help us achieve ours.

I thank you.

*WOZA (<http://wozazimbabwe.org/>), the acronym of Women of Zimbabwe Arise, is an Ndebele word meaning 'come forward'; hence WOZA is a grassroots movement of over 70,000 Zimbabweans. WOZA was formed in 2003 as a women's civic movement to: provide women with a united voice to speak out on issues affecting their lives; empower female community leadership to press for solutions to the current political and economic crisis; encourage women to stand up for their rights and freedoms; advocate for issues affecting women and their families. Over 3,000 WOZA members have spent time in police custody and often suffer brutal beatings for peaceful assembly and for raising their voices in defense of their human rights and fundamental freedoms*

*Magdonga Mahlangu and Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) are at the forefront of the struggle for peace and human rights in Zimbabwe. Ms. Mahlangu, a tireless and courageous human rights defender striving for democracy and women's rights, is a leader and principal organizer of WOZA's community-based advocacy and civic actions. She and WOZA coordinated over 100 non-violent public demonstrations and surveyed nearly 10,000 people on their hopes for a new Zimbabwe. Despite being arrested over 30 times and repeatedly facing police brutality, Ms. Mahlangu remains steadfast in her commitment to a brighter future for Zimbabweans (The Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights; <http://www.rfkcenter.org>).*