

9 March 2020

Malawi: Arbitrary detention of human rights defenders Gift Trapence and Macdonald Sembereka

On the night of 8 March 2020, human rights defenders Gift Trapence and Macdonald Sembereka were arrested in Lilongwe by the Malawi Police. They are currently detained without charges in the city of Blantyre.

[Gift Trapence](#) is a human rights defender and deputy chairperson of the Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) which promotes citizen participation and organises peaceful demonstrations denouncing alleged irregularities in the presidential elections in May 2019. [Reverend MacDonald Sembereka](#) is a human rights defender who coordinates the Human Rights Consultative Committee (HRCC), a network of local civil society organisations working on the accountability of government officials and promoting civil and political rights.

Following their arrests, Gift Trapence and Macdonald Sembereka were taken to Area 3 police station in Lilongwe and were later transferred to Blantyre. Gift Trapence is currently being held at Blantyre Police station while Macdonald Sembereka is detained at Nyambadwe Police Station. No formal charges have been brought against them. The arrests took place hours after the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) led by the Malawian President Peter Mutharika held a political rally in Blantyre. Senior DPP officials and cabinet ministers publicly accused the Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) of inciting violence and creating anarchy. They asserted that the state security apparatus would be deployed to silence the Human Rights Defenders Coalition in the context of the citizen's electoral justice march to the State House scheduled for 25 March 2020.

The arbitrary detention of Gift Trapence and Macdonald Sembereka is part of a pattern of state harassment of human rights defenders following demonstrations demanding the resignation of Jane Ansajh, the Chairperson of Malawi Electoral Commission, for alleged irregularities in the elections held on 21 May 2019. Previously, on 10 July 2019, Gift Trapence and Macdonald Sembereka were [arrested](#) in Lilongwe by Malawi Police on allegations of operating an illegal NGO, despite the fact that their NGO is duly registered under the Companies Act. They were granted bail on 12 July 2019.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the arbitrary detention of Gift Trapence and Macdonald Sembereka, as it believes that it is solely motivated by their legitimate activities defending human rights and promoting democratic values.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Malawi to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Gift Trapence and Macdonald Sembereka, as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being held solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Ensure that the treatment of Gift Trapence and Macdonald Sembereka, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the 'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;

3. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Malawi and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

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