

## **Swaziland Police News**

**19 March 2008 (IRIN)**

The Swazi police has been accused of using excessive force and the army has been deployed for domestic policing after a rare episode of political unrest in the mountain kingdom. As Swazi policemen clamped down on yet another protest action this week, concerns that the security force was being used as a political tool have been raised by non-governmental organisations. Public transport workers were teargassed at the downtown bus station in the central commercial town of Manzini on 17 March. Manzini, the country's transport hub, was shut down by mini-bus operators to show solidarity with textile workers, who have been on strike since 3 March. Dozens of shops were vandalised and the bus station's entrance was barricaded in this week's protest. Members of banned political parties had also urged onlookers to participate in the strike action. The police responded with rubber bullets and six people were hospitalised with gunshot wounds. Earlier this month, Swazi textile workers, who have been on strike to demand better salaries, were teargassed and beaten by police. At least a dozen workers were reportedly injured following attacks on peaceful marchers by the police on the first day of the strike. More than 16,000 workers, most of them women, have been affected by the strike action. The Swazi press characterised police violence against strikers as unjustified. So intense have the police attacks become that members of the Swaziland Manufacturing and Allied Workers Unions agreed with its leadership that it was "too dangerous" to continue the strike. The textile workers voted to suspend the strike action over the Easter holidays, and to resume their protest next week if no progress had been made with the employers, the Swaziland Textile Exporters Association. In a statement, the Swaziland Coalition of Concerned Civic Organisations (SCCCO) condemned the "continued abuse of the Royal Swazi Police and Umbutfo Swaziland Defence Force [the Swazi army] to achieve partisan and politically motivated actions". The SCCCO noted with particular concern the use of teargas and rubber bullets on "unarmed" women textile workers. "Police officers have been heard telling the women to 'get back to work.' What is their role here - protection of law and order or politically motivated strikebreaking?" read the statement, signed by Anglican Bishop Meshack Mabuza, the coalition chairman. Police spokesman Vusi Masuku said the police moved in to stop isolated acts of vandalism, and used "minimal force". He defended the police action, saying some marchers had attempted to stop other textile workers from going to work. Jason Simelane, a member of the banned political organisation, Peoples United Democratic Front (PUDEMO), said, "The police are a politicised force. They are under orders to silence dissent. The new constitutional guarantees about freedom of speech and assembly are meaningless." Organised political opposition groups were banned by royal decree in 1973 by King Sobhuza, father of current monarch, Mswati III. A new constitution signed into law by Mswati in 2005 provided for freedom of assembly but did not legalise political parties. While the police was being used to suppress political activity, demonstrators needed to show restraint, commented a political analyst based at the University of Swaziland. "The Swazi union movement has been aligned with pro-democracy groups for decades...the authorities view any strike action as a pretext for anti-government demonstrations...but their [authorities] job is made easy because the anti-government groups engage in violence and vandalism. If police need to show restraint, so do demonstrators."