

## PRESS RELEASE

### **CIVICUS condemns detention of Malawian civil society activists**

**Johannesburg. 10 March 2010.** In what clearly amounts to unjustified restriction of the freedom of expression, three members of the Malawian civil society organisation, Eye for Development remain in arbitrary detention on grounds of incitement of violence. Edward Chileka, Howard Jimu and Awoneji Chimera were arrested after a press conference for criticising the statement of President Dr Bingu wa Mutharika that priority in the disbursement of loans under the official Youth Enterprise Development Fund should be given to youth members of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party.

The three activists were further intimidated after their arrest on 24 February 2010 by being kept in arbitrary detention for six days. They were only presented before a court on 2 March in breach of the constitutional requirement to bring arrested persons before a judicial officer within 48 hours of the arrest. Their bail application was rejected on 4 March by the court which has scheduled the next hearing for 11 March.

Based on the press release issued by Eye for Development, which outlines the criticisms raised as well as direct information from trusted sources at the press conference, CIVICUS has found no evidence to suggest any incitement of violence against members of the ruling party as alleged by the authorities. The contents of the press release reflect the exercise of legitimate dissent expected in a democracy.

"The present attempt by the Malawian Government to muzzle criticism in this manner flies in the face of recent gains made through the holding of freer and fairer elections last year," said Ingrid Srinath, Secretary General of CIVICUS. "We urge the authorities to respect democratic norms and the public interest by immediately releasing these activists wrongfully detained for exercising their fundamental rights."

CIVICUS reiterates the important role discharged by civil society in national life through critical evaluation of official actions. It is vital that governments see civil society as key partners in development and accept legitimate criticism of state actions as an essential aspect of democratic governance. CIVICUS calls upon the Malawian Government to uphold constitutional and legal commitments to the people of Malawi by guaranteeing space to exercise democratic dissent.

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