



R2K Statement: R2K strongly condemns the arrest of Free State community health workers and TAC activists

11 July 2014

The Right2Know Campaign strongly condemns the arrest of more than 150 Free State health workers and TAC activists. About 100 were arrested by police in Bloemfontein during a night vigil at Bophelo House, the head office of the Free State Department of Health early on Thursday morning. Another 55 people were arrested later in the day.

The vigil by TAC members and community health workers was a response to the ongoing crisis in the provincial healthcare system, including an arbitrary decision to terminate the contracts of community healthcare workers. After many other attempts at engagement failed, members took a conscious decision to resort to civil disobedience in the form of a sit-in at Bophelo House.

Instead of addressing the concerns, the authorities responded by arresting the protestors - many of whom are elder community health workers. TAC leader Macobane Morake was reportedly punched in the face by a police officer who was not wearing a name tag. According to the TAC, police told protestors that they had been sent by Health MEC Benny Malakoane.

It is deeply concerning that the worker's democratic right to protest is being violated in this way. We demand that the Free State police release the arrested protestors immediately and drop all charges.

The R2K has noted with concern that the right to protest appears to be under threat in South Africa with policing becoming more aggressive and officials increasingly intolerant.

The decision to resort to civil disobedience when all avenues fail is a legitimate one. Thursday's events are part of a wider pattern where protesters are treated like criminals - this has been experienced by many other community organisations across the country. It also highlights the weaknesses and limitations of the Regulation of Gatherings Act - how can a peaceful protest be a crime?

We would like to inform the Free State government that the right to organise, protest and speak out is central to all community struggles for social justice. Instead of cracking down on dissent, the authorities should focus on addressing the problems that have forced this protest action.

The arrested members will appear at the Bloemfontein Magistrate Court later this morning, Friday 11 July. We join the call for them to be released and for all charges to be dropped.

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