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## Rice Honors Zimbabwe Lawyers Group on Human Rights Day

By David Gollust  
State Department  
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**Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice marked International Human Rights Day Monday by honoring a Zimbabwe lawyers group that has defended democracy activists in that country. Rice also met with leaders of human rights groups who faulted the Bush administration's own record on the issue. VOA's David Gollust reports from the State Department.**



AP Photo

Secretary Rice has given the State Department's first annual Freedom Defenders Award to the non-governmental group Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, which has provided legal assistance to besieged democracy activists there.

At a State Department ceremony, Rice presented the award to the organization's president, Arnold Tsunga, for what she said was its tireless and fearless work to advance democratic principles, despite ongoing repression by the government of President Robert Mugabe.

"In Zimbabwe, civil society remains under siege amid political and economic crises caused by the irresponsible policies of the regime," said Condoleezza Rice. "Over the past several months, the authorities have engaged in an intensified campaign of repression, characterized by harassment and intimidation, arrests and violent assaults against peaceful opposition activists, professionals, independent labor leaders, and other members of civil society."

State Department officials say the Zimbabwe lawyers group, founded 10 years ago, has been a target of vilification from the Mugabe government and that Tsunga himself has endured numerous arrests, police raids on his home and threats for his activities.

The Freedom Defenders Award was one of two created last year by the Secretary of State to promote the annual Human Rights Day observance.

Rice gave the parallel Diplomacy for Freedom Award to U.S.

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ambassador to Belarus Karen Stewart, for what were termed her innovative efforts to support defenders of freedom in that authoritarian central European state.

Rice also met privately Monday with leaders of several U.S.-based human rights groups, among them Amnesty International USA executive director Larry Cox.

In a written statement, Cox said the seriousness of the United States' commitment to human rights is called into question by its own practices in the war against terrorism, including the continued detention of some 300 terror suspects without charge or trial at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Cox said the group also pressed Rice to do more to help restore full democracy in Pakistan and to end violence against civilians in Sudan's Darfur region.

In luncheon comments to a **women's foreign policy group** Monday, Rice said the Bush administration would "like nothing better" than to close the Guantanamo facility, but must have assurances that what she termed the "very dangerous" detainees there would not return to anti-U.S. violence if handed back to their countries of origin.



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