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Anti-GBV protests draw international concern

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Page no: 1



DETAINED ... An anti-femicide protest on Saturday turned volatile after the Special Reserve Force was dispatched and tear gas and rubber bullets were fired at the crowd. Twenty-four protesters and three journalists were detained but later released

OKERI NGUTJINAZO and YOKANY OLIVEIRA

RECENT national protests under #ShutItAllDown have attracted attention locally and internationally, with president Hage Geingob implored to intervene.

The protests, which began on Thursday in Windhoek and called for an end to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and femicide in Namibia, were on Saturday met with tear gas, rubber bullets and 27 participants being detained by members of the Namibian Police's Special Field Force.

This included three journalists.

The movement, that saw protesters in other regions, namely Erongo, Otjozondjupa and //Karas joining demonstrations, was prompted after human remains, believed to be the missing Shannon Wasserfall, were found in a shallow grave in the dunes at Walvis Bay on Tuesday. Wasserfall had been missing since April this year.

South African politician Mmusi Maimane in a tweet urged Geingob to act on the crisis.

"Mr Hage Geingob, I sincerely hope you have listened to the women of Namibia. I hope you take rapid action, their cries have echoed across Africa and the world," he wrote.

Nigerians, who had their own fight against police brutality in their country under #EndSARS, stood in solidarity with Namibians.

"Please as we trend #EndSARS let us also remember our Namibian women who are fighting against gender-based violence. Let us march with them as well. Let's fight oppression together. Let's #ShutItAllDown," a Nigerian Twitter user said, while another added: "In support of Nigerians protesting against police brutality #EndSarsNow. Together with our Namibian brothers and sisters protesting against women and children abuse #ShutItAllDown".

Legal Assistance Centre director Toni Hancox condemned the police's heavy-handed response to protesters last week and over the weekend.

"The police should only use reasonable and justified measures to avert damage to life or property. The use of tear gas against the protesters is neither reasonable nor justified," she said in a statement.

In a democratic country, Hancox said, the public is allowed to raise their voices. She said SGBV has become a plague in Namibia and the government's lack of action has prompted the current protests.

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) also called on both minister of justice Yvonne Dausab and first lady Monica Geingos to use their influence to release #ShutItDown protesters, to which they responded they could not interfere with the course of the law.

"I have expressed elsewhere that as a member of the executive I must not interfere in the due process of law, but the normal processes of access to lawyers, etc. must be complied with. Fair trial rights remain intact regardless of the situation," Dausab said on Twitter.

When asked on social media if the appropriate legal intervention against gender-based violence perpetrators could be fast-tracked, Dausab said the amendment of the Combating of Rape Act is being prepared for parliament.

She said the real solution to GBV would be to "reignite our family and societal values" and to educate more and better.

Meanwhile, Popular Democratic Movement leader McHenry Venaani condemned the use of force by the police against protesters on Saturday, when some protesters claim they were assaulted by police officers.

Nampol's deputy inspector general for operations, major general Oscar Peter Embubulu, last week said the police would not tolerate any unlawful acts.

He said the Namibian Police had been lenient with protesters and had been pleading with them to observe the law.

"Unfortunately, while the public anger and repudiation of the violent crimes are justifiable, the demonstrations are not

only disorderly and unlawful, but they have also been violent and obstructive of law enforcement in the country," he said.

According to Embubulu, the crowd of around 300 protesters on Saturday unlawfully converged at Zoo Park in the capital.

"As the crowd got bigger, they marched from Zoo Park towards Wernhil Park shopping mall while shouting and obstructing the general traffic in the city centre. Upon arrival at Wernhil Park, they stormed into some of the shops in a rowdy manner before proceeding with their march to KFC along Mandume Ndemufayo Road," he said.

At KFC, he said the crowd also stormed inside.

Embubulu said the police had to implore them to desist from what they were doing, but protesters continued obstructing both the police and patrons, prompting them to use smoke grenades.

"They then regrouped in the city centre. This prompted the police to once more use a smoke grenade and tear gas, and eventually detained 27 of them for questioning and for obstructing the police in executing their duty," he said.

The 24 protesters were released on Saturday evening just before midnight after spending over eight hours in the Windhoek Correctional Facility's holding cells.

Two minors were also detained.

The People's Litigation Centre organised lawyers from different firms to assist the detained protesters.

The mother of one of the minors yesterday said she was worried about her daughter while she was in the holding cells.

She said she took her daughter to the doctor on Sunday for a check-up and to treat her leg, which got injured when she was thrown in a police van.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Prime minister Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila says the government will provide formal feedback on the protesters' petition against SGBV tomorrow after a Cabinet meeting.

The protesters handed the petition over to parliament on Thursday.

It included a list of 24 demands, including that a state of emergency should be declared due to SGBV in Namibia.

"Since receiving the petition, we have been working around the clock to review the demands and assess the key areas we intend to respond to," Kuugongelwa-Amadhila said.

Although formal feedback will be provided tomorrow, the prime minister says measures would be implemented in due course.

She in the meantime called for calm and cooperation. "We assure the Namibian nation that we as their elected leaders feel their pain, hear their cries and understand their anxiety," she said.

Bertha Tobias, who has been at the forefront of the demonstrations in Windhoek, said the only response the youth are looking for is a pragmatic and strategic way forward.

“The prime minister’s statement is not very encouraging as far as communicating substantive action is concerned. It feels very much like an attempt to appease,” she said.

Tobias said the youth will wait for the government’s response tomorrow.

“It is a form of almost gaslighting to suggest that the police operate professionally and in a way that always serves and protects Namibian citizens, especially having video evidence that that was not the case on Saturday,” she said.

Meanwhile, Azaan Madisia (28) was denied bail on Friday after she appeared in the Walvis Bay Magistrate’s Court on charges of murder and defeating or obstructing the course of justice in connection with the disappearance of the 22-year-old Wasserfall.