

JESTINA MUKOKO – HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST

We are all born with inalienable human rights, argues Jestina Mukoko, but sometimes you also have to defend them.

DATE OF BIRTH: 22 March 1967, Gweru, Zimbabwe

AWARDS: Weimar Human Rights Award (2009), Peace Award from the National Association of Non Governmental Organisations in Zimbabwe for ZPP (2009), Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition award for ZPP (2008)

ON THE SECOND DAY of her interrogation, Jestina Mukoko looked at her swollen feet and could not believe they belonged to her. They had been beaten so severely, she could barely stand.

On the fifth day, she found relief. Forced to kneel for hours on gravel while being questioned, she crossed the pain threshold. "It was excruciating, but then it was like I left my body," the Zimbabwean peace activist recalls.

The 43-year-old former journalist was abducted during a wave of arrests following an election that threatened to loosen Robert Mugabe's three-decade stranglehold on power. She was taken from her home near Harare in the early hours of a December morning in 2008 and, barefoot and still in pajamas, shoved into a car by armed intruders before the eyes of her teenage son.

For seven years, Mukoko has worked to protect human rights. As the head of

the Zimbabwe Peace Project (ZPP) since 2007, she knew she was in a precarious position. ZPP monitors politically motivated violations of human rights in a country where such practices had become increasingly common.

For three weeks after her abduction her whereabouts remained unknown. "During that period I was tortured both psychologically and physically. I wasn't sure whether I was going to live through what happened," she says in Germany, where she received the City of Weimar Human Rights award last December. Weimar, the city that gave its name to the last democratic German Republic before the National Socialists took control, remains a poignant symbol for human-rights defenders.

While Mukoko's brother toured the country's mortuaries looking for his sister, an international outcry drew attention to her case.

In late December 2008, she appeared in court facing charges of attempting to overthrow the government and was then held at Chikurubi maximum security prison for more than two months. In September of last year, however, the Zimbabwe Supreme Court exonerated her of all charges.

"Human rights are a fundamental part of our lives. We are born with these entitlements and we have to defend them," says the woman who believes democracy is returning to her beloved country.

