

## Rep. Bilirakis Calls on Zimbabwe to Release Detained Americans

WASHINGTON (4 Apr.) -- U.S. Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis (R-Fla.), member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, reacted strongly to the detention of foreign journalists and democracy advocates in Zimbabwe on Friday, and urged the government of President Robert Mugabe for their immediate release.

In a letter to Machivenyika Mapuranga, Zimbabwe's ambassador to the United States, Congress Bilirakis expressed "extreme displeasure with the questionable detention of foreign journalists and democracy advocates," which includes U.S. citizens.

Bilirakis cited two Americans in particular, Dileepan Sivapathasundaram, a senior program officer with the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and Barry Bearak, a correspondent with The New York Times. Both were suddenly detained on Thursday, and remain in the custody of security officials in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital, as of the release of the letter. "I implore your government to act on calls for the immediate release and safe return of all Americans currently detained," Bilirakis wrote.

He added that the arrest of foreign journalists appeared to be linked to election results that were not favorable to President Mugabe's ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union &ndash; Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF).

"In recent years, the Zimbabwean government has seized control of media outlets throughout the country, which makes this blatant suppression of foreign journalists from moving and reporting freely about the recent election results a clear effort to manipulate the flow of information out of Zimbabwe to benefit President Robert Mugabe and his ruling regime."

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