

Alleged coup plot in Zimbabwe

Chris Talbot, Barbara Slaughter
1 June 2001

An alleged coup plot, in which top military leaders would seize power and oust Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, has been leaked to the British *Guardian* newspaper and its sister paper, the South African *Mail and Guardian*.

The report, said to be based on information from South African government sources, suggests that the leader of the coup would be the present head of the Zimbabwean air force, Air Marshall Perence Shiri.

Shiri is known as a hardliner in the faction fight that is taking place in the ruling party, Zanu-PF. He led the Fifth Brigade that massacred tens of thousands of opponents of the Zanu-PF regime in Matabeleland in the 1980s. According the *Guardian*, Shiri has played a key role in organising the "War Veterans", who led the land occupations last year by carrying out attacks on white farmers and their labourers.

The planned coup is said to have been prepared in anticipation of food riots later this year. This year's maize crop is expected to fail, worsening already serious food shortages. Under these circumstances the army would suppress popular protest and possibly remove Mugabe from power.

International food experts, who have carried out an investigation on behalf of the World Food Programme, the Food and Agricultural Organisation and the early warning unit of the Southern African Development Community, have issued an urgent warning that Zimbabwe faces starvation on a massive scale. They have confirmed that, even with the use of the country's strategic reserves, there will be deficit of half a million tonnes of maize and severe shortages of wheat, sorghum, peanuts and soya beans.

There are known to be growing conflicts within Zanu-PF. Last weekend the Defence Minister Moven Mahachi was killed in a car crash, the second cabinet minister to die in a car crash in the past month. Mahachi was a strong backer of Mugabe, but is said to be unpopular with the military. Mugabe is attempting to hold on to the presidency at all costs in the elections next year. In the growing unrest within the country, he would, in all probability, declare a state of emergency and rule by decree. If the *Guardian* material is correct, the military top brass would not support him in such a situation.

Both the South African and Zimbabwean governments denied the reports.

It is significant that the leak follows the visit to South Africa by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who attacked Mugabe for "totalitarian methods". Powell said that the situation in Zimbabwe would become a problem to South Africa if people began fleeing over the border. In a thinly veiled threat he said, "We have our usual programs in the region, but we may have to do more as the situation deteriorates."

Powell's speech breaks a virtual silence on Zimbabwe from the Bush administration. To what extent the Zimbabwean military leaders would be collaborating with the US in removing Mugabe is not clear,

but an article on the South African news-site *Woza* reveals something of the US interest in the country.

The US was planning to finance a deal between a section of the white farmers and the Zanu-PF regime, in which 20,000 black farmers were to be resettled on land given by the white farmers. In return Mugabe would withdraw the war veterans, allowing commercial agriculture to continue.

A delegation of white farmers was due to fly to Washington for talks with the Bush administration, the IMF and the World Bank. But the deal was scuppered when a rich British businessman, Jon Bredenkamp, leaked details to the *Sunday Times*. Bredenkamp wanted to embarrass the Zanu-PF regime in front of its domestic supporters, by showing that after all its anti-imperialist rhetoric it was prepared to "sup with the devil."

His revelations have prevented US efforts to cement its influence within Zanu-PF. *Woza* quoted an unnamed expert who said, "The Bush administration was one of the few governments that did not condemn President Mugabe during his European tour in March. It wanted to keep its options open. . . . [The US] wanted to get back at the two super powers, France and the United Kingdom. By securing the deal and opening up financial lines for Zimbabwe, the US would have swept the carpet from under France's and Britain's feet."

It is significant that the coup proposals were leaked to the *Guardian*, one of the biggest supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in Zimbabwe. The MDC would have most to lose in a military takeover. The leak will make it more difficult for Zanu-PF hardliners to remove the unpopular Mugabe and thus preserve their rule.

The leak also reflects the interests of sections of British capital who want to prevent the US from getting control of Zimbabwe. The MDC is backed by the Zimbabwe Democracy Trust (ZDT), an organisation that includes former Tory Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd among its supporters. Its policies are pro-IMF, but it has been able to win support among the urban working class because its leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, is a top trade union bureaucrat and because Mugabe's economic policies have hit the towns hardest.

The "War Veterans" have begun to direct their attacks against workers. Using the pretext of settling old labour disputes, they storm into offices, factories, shops and other enterprises demanding payment of millions of Zimbabwean dollars. Workers are rounded up at gun point and taken to Zanu-PF rallies.

In recent weeks more than 200 factories in Harare alone have been targeted including Surgimed, Lion Matches, the National Railways of Zimbabwe, OK Zimbabwe, Universal Metals, and TM supermarkets.

Their shift in tactics follows the deterioration of the situation in the countryside, where the landless peasants they placed on white-owned farms earlier in the year now face starvation.

In the *Daily News* of May 22, Clever Chakanyuka, leader of the

farm occupations in Goromonzi, Mashonaland East, described the living conditions in the countryside. He said, "Since the beginning of the invasions I was at the forefront, but I am living like a madman... We have no food and they haven't given us any land. I believe they have used us. People are starving out there on the farms. We are just there. At times we are forced to go and beg for food from nearby homesteads. The government has abandoned us."

At the same time the government has stepped up its efforts against the leadership of the MDC. In an attempt to prevent Morgan Tsvangirai standing in the presidential elections, he has been charged with attempting to overthrow a legitimately elected government. If Tsvangirai is found guilty and receives a sentence of more than six months imprisonment, he will be ineligible for nomination as a presidential candidate.

There is opposition to Mugabe's reckless policy within Zanu-PF. Senior members of the government have urged him to halt the campaign of violence and intimidation against the MDC and reach an accommodation with them. Nkosana Moyo, minister of industry and commerce, has resigned. He has criticised the targeting of businesses and factories, which is deepening the economic crisis.

The economy began to go into recession as world commodity prices fell. Zimbabwe is heavily dependent on the export of tobacco. In response, the IMF demanded a stringent programme of cuts in public spending and privatisations. Mugabe, who has collaborated with the IMF for the past twenty years, reached the point where he had to refuse to carry out its policies because their measures threatened to undermine his power base. As a result the IMF and Western governments cut off all credit, leaving the country unable to import fuel or food.

Mugabe and Zanu-PF have attempted to overcome their economic crisis by intervening in neighbouring Congo (DRC). The army was deployed in 1998 at the massive cost of \$27m per month, to support the late President Kabila against rebel forces in the east. In return the Kabila regime granted lucrative business concessions.

Mugabe's regime is being kept afloat by the vast amount of booty accruing from these ventures. A UN investigation reported last month that Zimbabwe received "interesting" mining concessions in the DRC and that Zimbabwean companies, using their influence with the DRC government, developed business partnerships with private companies and parastatals. The report states, "The panel has enough elements and evidence to suggest that the government of the DRC under the late President Kabila gave strong incentives in the form of access, exploitation and management of mineral resources."

A report in the *Zimbabwe Independent* of April 20, lists Zimbabwe's business ventures involved, including Sengamines—through a private company, Operation Sovereign Legitimacy (Osleg)—whose shareholders include army chief General Vitalis Zvinvashe and former Defence Permanent Secretary Job Whabira. Through a partnership with late President Kabila's company Comiex to form Cosleg, "Zimbabwe (Zanu-PF) was able to exploit and market minerals, timber and other resources of the DRC," the report said. In this way Zimbabwe has acquired two of the richest state owned mining concessions—the Kimberlite Deposits in Tshibua and the alluvial deposits in the Senga Senga River.

Following the assassination of Kabila senior, his successor Joseph Kabila agreed to accept the UN sponsored Lusaka peace deal. While the previous US administration looked favourably upon Rwanda and Uganda, which led the rebel attempt to oust Kabila senior, the Bush administration needs Zimbabwe and Angola to enforce the Lusaka

accord. Zimbabwe has 40,000 well trained and comparatively well equipped soldiers at its disposal in the DRC.

It is significant that the UN report treats Zimbabwe's involvement in the DRC mining industry as a legitimate business, but condemns the "systematic looting" by Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi. It accuses them of exporting gold, diamonds and cobalt from the DRC and denounces them for fomenting the conflict for economic gain. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has urged the Security Council to ban shipments of minerals and timber from the three countries. President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, once hailed as one of the new leaders of an African renaissance, comes in for particular criticism.

Zimbabwe is the main route through which the DRC's mineral resources can be brought out, but this will be of no advantage to the West if Mugabe drives the country into a state of civil war. What is more, as Powell also pointed out, unrest in Zimbabwe threatens to destabilise South Africa, which is strategically vital to US global interests.

Therefore there are clearly two options available—either secure the removal of Mugabe and make a deal with a section of Zanu-PF and the military, or bring the MDC to power.

All the leading political elements in Zimbabwe are competing with one another to win support from the major imperialist powers, the IMF and the transnational companies. None of them offer a perspective for the working class and poor masses of Zimbabwe.

The MDC has offered itself as the representative of the IMF. Its policies would lead to an even more serious deterioration of the living conditions of the poor and foment civil war—as the implementation of IMF policies has done in Rwanda and other African countries.

Zanu-PF is riven by factions. There are some such as the junior army officers who have not profited as much as the army top brass from the intervention in the DRC who want to collaborate with the MDC. While some hardliners remain loyal to Mugabe, others, like Shiri, are coming to the conclusion that he must go if they are to continue to grow fat on the exploitation of the DRC. Mugabe himself is equally prepared to put himself at the service of the transnational mining companies and the imperialist powers, if they will have him.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact