

# Zimbabwe: Mugabe regime steps up repression as economy collapses

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Zimbabweans are responding to growing poverty and unemployment with strikes and demonstrations.

In July, shops and banks closed as workers took strike action in protest over the government's management of the economy and a rise in fuel prices. On August 8, riot police and troops opened fire on striking steel workers, killing two and seriously wounding ten others.

Inflation has topped 70 per cent and is set to rise further as the economy collapses. The price of basic commodities has rocketed. The cost of milk and dairy products has doubled over the past year, bread prices have doubled since January and the cost of drugs has increased by 127 percent. The unemployment rate is around 60 percent. In June, the Zanu-PF government announced a 74 percent increase in petrol prices. Fuel for cooking and transport is in short supply, as Zimbabwe has little foreign currency to buy it from abroad.

However, the lack of foreign currency has not prevented the government from purchasing anti-riot gear. This month it made a down payment of \$105 million to the Beit Alfa Trailer Company, which makes equipment for the Israeli security forces. Beit Alfa will supply the Zimbabwean government with 30 specially designed riot vehicles and water cannon.

The government's security preparations indicate that it sees urban workers as the main threat to its continued hold on power. President Robert Mugabe employs socialist rhetoric and presents himself as an opponent of imperialism, but the violent repression of striking workers shows the reactionary nature of his policies.

At the same time, Mugabe has stepped up the seizures of land from white farmers. This month, one farmer was killed and 21 others arrested after clashes with the war veterans carrying out the land seizures.

The Chinoyi area, one of the most productive corn and tobacco districts, 74 miles north west of the capital Harare, has become the centre for the latest land seizures. On August 7, gangs of Zanu-PF supporters ran through Chinoyi beating up at random any whites they found. At least ten people were severely injured in the attacks. By last week, 350 white farmers and their families had fled the region.

This month Agriculture Minister Joseph Made announced that 20 million acres of white-owned land would be taken over by government-backed squatters, and warned the farmers not to resist. Altogether 5,800 commercial farms—about 94 percent of the total—have been listed for compulsory acquisition.

This is in a situation where those that have been settled on the recently seized land face starvation because they have not been given seed, fertiliser, equipment or food to tide them over until the harvest. In some cases, unemployed workers, few of whom have experience as farmers, have been forcibly removed from the towns and resettled at

gunpoint.

Mugabe's strategy is to use the farm occupations to build up his support in the rural areas, as a counterweight to the urban masses. In a recent parliamentary by-election Zanu-PF was able to increase its majority, partly by intimidation and vote-rigging but also because the landless poor hope that the land seizures will benefit them. With opposition journalists constantly facing arrest and most foreign journalists banned, the government has tried to suppress news about the bad conditions facing those that have been recently settled on seized land.

The effect of the land seizures, however, has only been to deepen the economic crisis and increase the level of poverty in the countryside, as tens of thousands of workers on the large-scale commercial farms have lost their jobs. These have been turned into homeless refugees, burnt out of their houses by government thugs.

More modern large-scale agriculture is being replaced with subsistence peasant cultivation, in a retrograde step that threatens this fertile country with famine.

As commercial farming has been disrupted, Zimbabwe has lost the export earnings from agricultural products on which its economy depends. Already half the population of the country live on less than \$1 a day. In the townships, thousands of people are living in unsanitary and overcrowded conditions. Added to this, Zimbabwe faces an unprecedented health crisis. It has the third highest adult AIDS infection rate, with one adult in four being HIV positive. Yet public spending on health has been cut in real terms by one-third this year.

Mugabe has denounced the Western governments that have protested against his clamp-down on the white farmers. In a recent speech, he accused London and Washington of hypocrisy because, "When the British brutalised and traumatised us, the so-called democratic world would not lift a finger or even raise an eyebrow".

This is of course true, but it does not explain what has happened in Zimbabwe since 1979. Before coming to power, Mugabe and the nationalist leaders of what was then the Patriotic Front advocated a policy of restoring land to the peasantry. This had won them substantial support in the rural areas, among the landless poor who had been dispossessed by white settlers. Giving up land reform was part of the compromise deal struck in the Lancaster House Conference that brought Zanu-PF to power.

Indeed, Mugabe begged white farmers to stay and help build up Zimbabwe's economy. For 20 years, he has worked amicably with the white farmers, supporting capitalist enterprise and the measures proposed by the International Monetary Fund.

His enthusiasm for anti-imperialist rhetoric has only returned in the

last two years, when the IMF refused to grant new loans and a Western-backed opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), emerged. By stepping up the campaign against the white farmers, Mugabe and the Zanu-PF government are desperately attempting to defend their rule. They represent a narrow elite whose system of patronage and corruption has become increasingly at odds with Western governments and financial institutions that want to open up the Zimbabwean economy to the global markets.

The political character of the MDC means Mugabe has been able to allow economic devastation to impoverish the mass of the population whilst increasing his hold on power. Financed by the West, the MDC supports IMF demands that the economy should be entirely privatised, subsidies removed and public sector spending slashed.

Hostility to Mugabe's rule meant that the MDC nearly won a majority in last year's parliamentary elections, and it has built up considerable support in the urban areas. But the MDC and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) that is closely allied with it have done nothing to mobilise mass working class action against the Mugabe regime, limiting their opposition to pursuing court cases against Zanu-PF vote-rigging.

The only organised protest taken so far was a one-day general strike called in July by the ZCTU, in which strikers were urged not to take to the streets to avoid attacks from the riot police. Whilst workers in other industries have taken strike action over the shooting of the two steelworkers, the ZCTU has merely called for an inquiry into the deaths, with a public report on the outcome.

Nor does the MDC and trade union bureaucracy have any policies for the rural poor. Their attempts earlier this year to advocate land reform were unconvincing, in the light of their backing for the IMF's "economic reforms," which are entirely opposed to programmes aimed at alleviating rural poverty or redistributing land.

Limiting themselves to parliamentary protests in the face of deteriorating social conditions as well as growing police intimidation and repression in the urban areas, the MDC is now losing support. Even the *Standard*, the main newspaper supporting the MDC, reports "disillusionment growing among opposition supporters, who seem to feel that party leaders take voters for granted."

The MDC leaders are clearly more afraid of their supporters organising defence squads against the security forces and taking matters into their own hands than they are of the Mugabe regime.

In the meantime, Mugabe appears to have strengthened his grip over the Zanu-PF apparatus. According to the *Economist*, he has told his cabinet that he will not tolerate cowards, and knocked his finance minister, Simba Makoni, into line. Makoni, who has been trying to repair relations with creditors and Western donors, had advised him to call off the attacks on white farmers and businesses.

Opposition from the leaders of Zimbabwe's armed forces, a key part of the ruling elite, is also unlikely, according to *Africa Confidential* magazine. The army will remain in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where senior officers are able to continue with lucrative business ventures, including diamond mining. As the Zimbabwean economy collapses, the exploitation of the Congo's resources has become the mainstay of the Zanu-PF regime.

Western powers are now running out of patience with Mugabe, and are threatening punitive action because they are concerned about the impact of unrest in Zimbabwe on the rest of the region. The prospect of refugees flocking across the border into South Africa is particularly unnerving.

Last week the US Senate approved the Zimbabwe Democracy and

Economic Recovery Bill, which will go before Congress next month. Unless attacks on the opposition, the media and the judiciary are ended, the bill threatens "targeted sanctions," specifically against Mugabe and his senior officials for their "alleged promotion of violence and lawlessness in Zimbabwe". Part of its provisions would place travel restrictions on Mugabe, his cabinet ministers, service chiefs and their families. It also would require the US representatives at the IMF and the World Bank to vote against support for the country.

Targeted sanctions and other measures are also likely to be imposed at the European Union (EU) general council meeting in October. In June, the EU threatened that it would "take appropriate measures" if Harare did not "restore the rule of law, [and] end political violence" within two months, and "publicly commit itself to holding free and fair presidential elections next year." They also demanded that the farm occupations should cease.

The British press has called for action by the "international community". The *Independent* is demanding that the West should "stand up to President Mugabe." "Not only should it not bail Zimbabwe out economically until the human rights violations have ended, but it should also begin now to monitor preparations for next year's elections." The paper also demands that President Mbeki of South Africa should take a much tougher line with his neighbour.

Britain has contingency plans in place to evacuate 25,000 British nationals in Zimbabwe, but the Blair government has denied that it is assembling troops in neighbouring countries for such an action.

Ominously, a previously unknown group calling itself "The Scorpions" threatened to bomb the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which recently met in Malawi, particularly threatening Mugabe who was attending the proceedings. Earlier this year, a leader of Zanu-PF and the Defense Minister, both said to be close to Mugabe, mysteriously met their deaths in car accidents. It is possible that Mugabe could be assassinated, like DRC President Laurent Kabila, and be replaced by some one else from the regime who seems more amenable to Western demands.

The only purpose of such an action would be to impose an IMF programme on Zimbabwe, with disastrous consequences for the mass of the population who would face even greater poverty than at present.

*See Also:*

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