

European Union takes united action against Zimbabwe

Barbara Slaughter
27 February 2002

The decision of the European Union (EU) to withdraw its team of election observers from Zimbabwe and impose sanctions marks a significant political shift. In the past the EU has been divided in its attitude towards Zimbabwe, whereas last week's decision to pull out the observers shows a remarkable unanimity.

The sanctions include a freeze on the overseas assets of President Mugabe and 19 top government officials, as well as a ban on their travelling to the 15-nation block. They also include an embargo on the sale of arms and technical advice and the cutting off of millions of dollars in development aid for the 2002-2007 period. The EU foreign ministers' statement alleged that all 20 individuals on the list were responsible for "serious violations of human rights in Zimbabwe".

Mugabe insists that the sanctions will be ineffective and denies that he has any funds abroad. US government sources cited by the *Financial Times* of January 18 claim that "capital outflows from top officials to tax havens in Europe and the US had been increasing in the months ahead of the presidential elections in March." Ed Royce, the chairman of the Africa Committee of the US House of Representatives, also said that senior Zimbabwean officials and army generals were sending money to "safe havens" in Europe and the US.

The US rapidly followed up the EU initiative by also applying sanctions, giving the EU the unusual role of setting the pace in foreign affairs. The House of Representatives had already passed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act in preparation for the application of sanctions against Zimbabwe's leaders. The BBC's correspondent in Washington said, "Although the US is allowing the EU to take the lead on Zimbabwe sanctions, it clearly supports their line".

Rather than expressing unanimity with the Bush administration, however, the Europeans' new decisiveness reflects an attempt to establish Europe's independence from Washington on questions of foreign policy.

Ever since President Bush's "axis of evil" State of the Union address, concern about US militarism has been expressed by a succession of European leaders. French Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine condemned Bush's speech as "simplistic" and "absurd". Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy spokesman, warned against America's "global unilateralism". European Commissioner Chris Patten has been the most forthright when he urged European governments to speak up before Washington "goes into unilateralist overdrive".

Bush's determination to pursue a unilateralist offensive to assert America's global hegemony has impressed on the EU states the need to show a greater cohesion and decisiveness in their own foreign affairs. Europe cannot afford to allow an African head of state to make it look weak and foolish when the US is using its unparalleled military strength to stake a claim to strategic resources all over the world. These concerns are undoubtedly behind the EU's decision to put internal differences to one side and agree on taking sanctions against Mugabe.

The change has not gone unnoticed in the US. In the *Wall Street Journal* on February 19, Geoff Winestock noted, "the EU has started taking more unified positions... especially in Africa, where it has huge influence despite Europe's colonial past."

He continued, "The EU hesitated for months as Robert Mugabe used increasing political violence to maintain power in Zimbabwe. But after issuing numerous warnings, EU foreign ministers finally decided to take action Monday, after Mr Mugabe ejected European diplomats who had arrived to monitor next month's hotly contested elections... That tough stance puts the EU ahead of Zimbabwe's African neighbours and also of the US."

Forcing countries to accept election observers has become an important part of Western policy toward Africa, since the IMF, World Bank and international donors began to insist on "transparent and accountable" government during the early 1990s. While it has been presented under a façade of democracy, its intention has been to strengthen colonial control in Africa.

In Zimbabwe Mugabe and the ruling Zanu-PF government initially went along with IMF demands. In the early 1990s the government implemented the IMF inspired structural adjustment programme, the *Framework for Economic Reform* (1991-95).

This programme of financial liberalisation included tax cuts for the rich and massive cuts in social spending. It led to a dramatic increase in poverty, both in the cities and in the rural areas and gave rise to mounting political protests and strike action.

Only when Mugabe felt his own position threatened did he begin to raise objections to the IMF's demands. In 1999 the IMF insisted on the introduction of a draconian economic programme as the price to be paid for further loans. When the country failed to meet its fiscal and other targets, the IMF and World Bank withheld their support and other donors followed suit.

Faced with an unprecedented economic and social crisis, and rising opposition to the Zanu-PF government, Mugabe embarked on a campaign of land seizures, occupying hundreds of large white-

owned farms and driving out their black employees. Gangs of so-called “war veterans” were mobilised to suppress all opposition with beatings and murders.

The Human Rights Forum in Zimbabwe claims that 150 have been killed, thousands tortured and at least 70,000 rendered homeless in the occupation campaign over the past two years. Much of the violence has been directed against the political opposition in the urban areas, in an attempt to shore up Zanu-PF’s rule.

Britain, the former colonial power, has led the drive to open up the Zimbabwean economy. It has long-standing mining and agricultural interests in the country and connections with the white commercial farmers who own most of the best land.

The Zimbabwe Democratic Trust (ZDT), made up of a group of powerful British and American businessmen and politicians, supports the main Zimbabwean opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change. Since the MDC’s formation three years ago, the ZDT have provided it with extensive monetary assistance and advice. Members of the ZDT have direct financial interests in Zimbabwe.

The other European powers have not always agreed with Britain’s approach. France and the UK have long been imperialist rivals in Africa and are intent on strengthening their influence over their one-time colonies. France has preferred to work through Mugabe, who has provided valuable local assistance in securing France’s interests against rebel forces in the three-year civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In September 1998, Mugabe sent troops into the DRC, at the cost to the Zimbabwean exchequer of over \$US3 million a month. His troops have trained the Interahamwe militias who fled to the DRC after carrying out the genocidal massacre in Rwanda and have since supported the government of Laurent Kabil and now his son Joseph.

Last year President Chirac welcomed Mugabe to the Elysée Palace when he was under pressure from Britain over the land occupations. Britain’s appeals for support at that time were ignored, so France’s agreement to pull out the election observers represents the most significant shift in Europe’s attitude to Mugabe and in its own relations with the UK.

For some time the two countries have been developing a measure of collaboration over African policy. Last month UK Foreign Secretary Straw and Védrine made a joint visit to the DRC to demonstrate to the contending sides that they could not continue to play off the two former colonial powers.

France came round to the decision to pull the observers out of Zimbabwe when the leader of the EU’s observer team, Pierre Schori, Sweden’s Ambassador to the UN, was expelled from Zimbabwe on February 16. A senior Zimbabwean government official stated, “Schori is in breach of his visa conditions. He is guilty of trying to impose himself on our electoral process. He is guilty of political arrogance and of insulting behaviour and this cannot continue and if that is his intention he is not welcome. He cannot stay.”

As far back as last November, Mugabe had made it clear he would restrict international observation of the presidential poll. He said he would invite the SADC, the new African Union (formerly the Organisation of African Unity) the Commonwealth, the West

African group Ecowas and the African Caribbean Pacific Group, but he did not want the EU.

On January 29, the EU threatened to impose “targeted sanctions” on Zimbabwe if it failed to allow election observers into the country by February 3. Mugabe then attempted to divide the EU by inviting observers from some European countries whilst excluding Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK, whom he said supported the MDC. The EU said it would not accept his conditions, but nonetheless put together a delegation that did not include members from countries “deemed to be unfriendly to the Harare government.”

Although Pierre Schori was Swedish, it seems that the EU thought he would be acceptable because he has had previous experience of election monitoring in Zimbabwe and had known Mugabe over a number of years. He entered the country on a tourist visa and told the BBC that he thought it would still be possible to monitor the presidential election “in spite of the difficulties”. He did not seek accreditation himself and stressed that the delegation must be pragmatic in order to be present on the ground.

The decision to pull all the observers out and impose the sanctions was only taken after a lengthy debate among EU foreign ministers in Brussels. Even after Schori’s expulsion, some members were still arguing that it might be better not to impose sanctions and keep the observers in place until after the elections. Several countries including Portugal, Greece and Finland still argued strongly that the EU should keep its observer mission on the ground. Britain could therefore only succeed in getting the ministers to impose sanctions after France swung behind them.

So intense has the conflict between France and the US been in Africa historically that it has been referred to as the “second Cold War.” During the civil war in the DRC, the US was more sympathetic to Uganda and Rwanda who threw their weight behind the rebel forces. France’s change in attitude towards Mugabe reflects the fact that rivalry between the US and France is now being expressed on a much wider stage. In the global perspective, Mugabe’s past services count for very little compared to the urgent need to show that Europe can act in concert.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said the decision “sends out a strong message about the credibility” of EU election observer missions, wherever they might be deployed. Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel also said Europe would lose credibility if it failed to act.

Whatever the outcome of the Zimbabwe presidential election, this decision shows that the EU will step up its attempts to remove Mugabe. They will seek to impose a regime either made up of Zanu-PF leaders opposed to Mugabe or the MDC or some combination of the two that will be more responsive to European business interests.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact