

UK government's hypocritical stance over World Cup cricket match in Zimbabwe

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The start of the World Cup cricket tournament in Africa was overshadowed by a dispute involving the International Cricket Council (ICC), the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) and the England cricket team.

At the centre of the dispute were statements made by the Blair Labour government in the weeks preceding the tournament. In December 2002 senior government ministers began a moral outcry against the England cricket players, condemning them for agreeing to play matches in Zimbabwe. They called for England's February 13 match against Zimbabwe—scheduled to be played in the capital Harare—to be boycotted by the England team.

Labour's International Development Secretary Clare Short kicked off the campaign, calling for the match to be scrapped. It would be "shocking and deplorable" for the England team to visit Zimbabwe, Short said, given the oppressive character of the Mugabe regime. President Robert Mugabe had "stolen" recent elections, Short continued, and was now starving his people "because they dared to vote freely". Zimbabwe, like much of southern Africa, is in the grip of famine.

Prime Minister Tony Blair added to the pressure. Government officials let it be known that Blair was of the opinion that the team should not go to Zimbabwe and asked the England cricket players to "reflect" on the "humanitarian and political crisis in Zimbabwe". Whilst stating that the final decision on whether to play in the country was up to the cricketing authorities, the government made clear that its advice was that the team should not go. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw stated explicitly that he was against the fixture being played.

Coming just six weeks before the start of the tournament, the government's intervention caused consternation amongst the cricket authorities, who were

faced with heavy financial fines should they pull out of the tournament at the last moment. ECB Chief Executive Tim Lamb accused the government of "double standards" and told reporters that cricket was being "treated differently to the 300 other [British] businesses which continue to trade in Zimbabwe, which ministers aren't discouraging."

The government's objections were all the more unexpected because it had been known for four years that the World Cup was scheduled to be played in Zimbabwe, yet it had left its complaint until the last moment. In October 2001 the England cricket team played five one-day matches in Zimbabwe without condemnation.

According to the Conservative supporting *Daily Telegraph*, Lamb had participated in a meeting at the British Foreign Office in July 2002 where he was told that there was no "absolute impediment" to the England team playing in Zimbabwe. Former sports minister Kate Hoey said that she was "absolutely certain" that there was no instruction stating otherwise.

Such was the atmosphere created that the England team and officials begun receiving death threats, causing the ECB to request that the ICC reschedule England's matches. During the England tour of Australia, for example, threatening notes signed by the "Organised Resistance" were pushed under the players hotel room doors. Lamb received a letter from another unknown organisation named the "Sons and Daughters of Zimbabwe," which threatened the lives of the England cricket team if they played in Harare and also threatened their families back in the UK.

The ICC denied both requests, stating that the death threats were "not substantial" and that some of the material provided by the ECB was "unclear and of uncertain reliability." Andre Pruis, deputy National

Commissioner of the South African Police, who is in charge of World Cup security, concluded that the letter from the “Sons and Daughters of Zimbabwe” was “propaganda and not a direct threat”. He said it was “nonsense”. Despite assurances, the England team refused to play in Harare and the game was cancelled and the four winning points rewarded to Zimbabwe.

The World Cup is part of a \$500 million deal between the ICC and its commercial partners. The ECB will now have to pay a £1 million fine and compensate the Global Cricket Corporation for the loss of the broadcast. When the ECB asked the UK government to compensate it for this financial loss as a result of carrying out its political directive the government responded that it would be “extremely odd for the taxpayer to foot the bill for an independent sporting organisation”.

Mugabe is unquestionably a brutal dictator whose bourgeois nationalist ZANU-PF regime serves the interests of a tiny wealthy elite at the expense of the Zimbabwean masses. He responded predictably to the furore—announcing a security crackdown in advance of the games, and threatening anyone seeking to display their defiance before the world’s cameras. Measures were being taken to “weed out would-be troublemakers and other social misfits,” Zimbabwe’s head of security Albert Mandizha told reporters, and any one seen wearing black armbands—as advocated by Cricket Supporters for Democracy—would “have to be attended to”.

Following the games, the pro-government *Herald* newspaper called on the ICC to take action against two Zimbabwe cricketers for “bringing the game into disrepute”. Both players wore black armbands in Zimbabwe’s opening game against Namibia in protest against the Mugabe regime’s attack on democratic rights.

But the absence of democratic rights in Zimbabwe is not the real reason for the Blair government’s intervention into cricketing schedules. Dictatorship and human rights abuses do not usually prevent English cricketers playing abroad. For example, the England team has played numerous games over the past few years in Pakistan, which is governed by a military dictatorship led by General Pervaiz Musharraf. It also plays regularly in Sri Lanka where a civil war has raged for 19 years, accompanied by the brutal repression of

the Tamil minority. Both these regimes are considered allies of the UK, however, and so their own violation of human rights is conveniently ignored.

Rather, the cricket row is just the latest cynical episode in the Blair government’s efforts to re-establish British imperialism’s presence in a number of its former colonies.

Mugabe joins a growing list of those rulers, such as Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic, who having previously been promoted and propped up by western governments, have subsequently fallen out of favour and are to be subject to “regime change”.

The Zimbabwean president is considered not to have implemented with sufficient vigour International Monetary Fund and World Bank demands for the country’s economy to be opened up fully to international capital, due to his fear that such measures will ultimately jeopardise his own rule and privileges.

Consequently, the British government has led a campaign to destabilise Mugabe and replace his regime with one more responsive to western demands, “discovering” and highlighting human rights abuses and financing opposition tendencies.

Its real attitude towards the plight of Zimbabwe’s masses is revealed in its response to the severe food shortage gripping the country. In Zimbabwe alone, more than 8 million people face starvation as part of the famine stalking southern Africa—a catastrophe due in no small part to IMF insistence on the “economic restructuring” of agriculture. Despite Short’s pronouncements over the crisis, however, Zimbabwe is being denied sufficient food aid, as Britain and the West use the famine as a means of tightening their control over the country.



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