

US and Britain in plans for “road map” for Zimbabwe

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A series of meetings involving African leaders and representatives from the United States and Britain have taken place in Southern Africa aimed at forcing the removal of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe. The plan is to bring in a transitional government in Zimbabwe made up of the ruling Zanu-PF party and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) that will then adopt economic emergency measures.

The US is taking a more prominent role in Zimbabwe in exchange for British support for the war in Iraq. US Under Secretary of State for Africa Walter Kansteiner has just completed a weeklong visit to South Africa and Botswana. In an interview with the British *Independent* newspaper he declined to use the term “regime change” for Zimbabwe—preferring instead to demand “regime legitimacy” which he said called for a “Road Map” like that which the US is seeking to impose in the Middle East.

Last week Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Bakili Muluzi of Malawi met Mugabe for talks followed by a separate meeting with MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai. Mugabe has intimated that he may be prepared to retire, though he refused to consider negotiations with the MDC unless they drop a court case challenging the validity of last year’s presidential elections.

So far Tsvangirai has refused to recognise Mugabe as president. He also demanded a halt to jailings and torture of MDC members, the repeal of the Public Order and Security Act and anti-press laws introduced by Mugabe last year.

African leaders are under great pressure from the West to effect Mugabe’s removal. They have been told that future trade and investment plans, including the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) intended to gain more western support for Africa,

depend on them showing that they can bring about “good governance” among their peers. Mbeki, in particular, appears to have got the message after the Iraq war that the “little countries” of Africa, as he put it in a speech to the African Union last month, could “be punished if we get out of line”.

None of the African leaders want to be seen openly to be acting as a Western stooge, however. One of the criticisms they have of Tsvangirai is that he has lost much credibility for being so obviously dependent on the support of the British and wealthy white farmers. Earlier this year Obasanjo called for the Commonwealth—made up of Britain and its ex-colonies—to lift the suspension of Zimbabwe it imposed last year after accusing Mugabe of rigging the elections. Since no more land occupations are taking place he even argued that the situation in Zimbabwe was improving.

It seems that Obasanjo was only persuaded to abandon this conciliatory position and to hold the meeting with Mugabe after manoeuvrings by Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon. Commonwealth observers made no criticisms of the fraudulent Nigerian presidential elections and McKinnon immediately recognised Obasanjo as president.

Mbeki is also under pressure to abandon his previous refusal to be seen interfering in the affairs of his smaller neighbour.

South Africa risks destabilisation if Zimbabwe continues to spiral out of control. Zimbabwe now faces over 200 percent inflation; large sections of its industry are no longer functioning and up to 60 percent of skilled professional workers are said to have left the country. Over half the population face starvation due to famine and despite the country’s fertile land,

agricultural production has slumped. Many of the black farmers that seized land under Mugabe's occupation programme have been forced to give up through lack of investment. Hundreds of refugees are attempting to cross into South Africa.

Kansteiner promised US financial support to smooth the path for Mbeki to persuade Zanu-PF leaders to remove Mugabe and agree to work with the MDC. According to the *Financial Times* he said, "Zimbabwe will need a tremendous amount of reconstruction, and if the process leads to a breakthrough, we are ready to jump in with both technical and financial resources."

This could include technical aid to rebuild infrastructure, paying for new elections, as well as direct bilateral aid.

Diplomatic efforts are now concentrated on sorting out the infighting within Zanu-PF over Mugabe's possible successor. Commentators are suggesting that Mbeki; the US and Britain are all backing Simba Makoni who was sacked by Mugabe as Zanu-PF finance minister last year. Makoni is known to favour International Monetary Fund policies, but is said to lack support in the Zanu-PF hierarchy.

Clearly pleased by the support from Kansteiner, Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw made a two-day visit to South Africa this week to put more pressure on Mbeki. In an interview with the *Financial Times* last month Prime Minister Tony Blair requested "a bigger focus by the international community on Zimbabwe".

He explained, "I have never had a difficulty with the concept of intervention, it doesn't, as I say, necessarily mean that it is armed intervention, it can be diplomatic intervention, it can be pressure."

Whilst full scale armed intervention in Zimbabwe may have been ruled out, given the exhausted and overstretched state of Britain's armed forces, there have been several rumours of covert operations being planned. This could presumably involve giving the MDC more support in its campaign against the Mugabe regime. The latest report from the pro-Zanu PF *Sunday Mirror* is of a secret meeting that took place in the Kalahari Desert in Botswana, not far from the Zimbabwe border.

The meeting is said to have been at a game ranch belonging to the powerful Oppenheimer family, associated with De Beers diamonds and Anglo-American gold mining. It was attended by South

Africa's foreign minister Aziz Pahad, whose spokesman confirmed to the *Mirror* that the meeting had taken place. Also present were a British military general, an official from the World Bank, a US official (this could have been Kansteiner since he was in Botswana at the time), and British ex-Tory minister for Africa, Baroness Chalker—an advisory director to Unilever, the British multinational with extensive operations in Africa.

The meeting was hosted by Moeletsi Mbeki, brother of the president and deputy director of the South Africa Institute for International Affairs, as well as a prominent Zimbabwean businessman Strive Masiyama. Also in attendance was Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, said to have stopped over on his flight to London to discuss the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Apart from the fact that it discussed the "problems in Zimbabwe", the *Mirror* has no further information on what was being plotted.



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