

Zimbabwe: Mugabe government halts food aid

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19 June 2008

The ZANU-PF government of President Robert Mugabe has banned aid agencies from distributing food in rural areas of Zimbabwe in the run up to the second round of the presidential elections later this month. The effect of the ban is to give the government almost complete control over the food supply.

This is the latest phase in “Operation Makavhoterapapi?” or “Where did you put your vote?” The campaign has involved systematic beatings, kidnappings and murders in an attempt to intimidate the population into voting for Mugabe.

More than one third of the Zimbabwean population is dependent on food aid. Some 1.3 million of the four million people who face starvation as a result of the government’s ban on aid agencies are children under the age of five who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS.

In the past Mugabe has always been able to rely on support from the countryside, particularly Mashonaland. But in the March elections it was clear that ZANU-PF had lost its electoral heartland and that mass opposition was developing among the rural poor. The ban on food aid is Mugabe’s response to the collapse of his previous social base.

The order to halt food distributions came as Mugabe was at the world food summit in Rome. He used the occasion to posture as an opponent of imperialism. But behind his cynical rhetoric, he is prepared to starve the most vulnerable sections of the Zimbabwean population rather than relinquish power.

Mugabe and the corrupt elite that surround him are seeking to hold on to power at whatever cost to the rural poor and urban working class. It is estimated that 25,000 people have been displaced since the March election, 65 people are thought to have been killed, a further 200 are reported missing and 3,000 people have been treated in hospital as a result of violent attacks.

Many of those killed have been activists of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) led by Morgan Tsvangirai. Tsvangirai won a majority of the vote in the presidential poll, but according to the official count did not win the overall majority needed to avoid a second round. The MDC emerged from the parliamentary and local government polls that took place at the same time as the majority party.

Tsvangirai and other leading members of the MDC have been repeatedly arrested and harassed during the election campaign. Trade union leaders and smaller political groups have been treated in the same way as the MDC. Arthur Mutambara, the leader of a breakaway faction of the MDC, was arrested. Lovemore Matombo, president of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), and Wellington Chibembe, general secretary of the ZCTU, were arrested and banned from speaking at political rallies. Six members of the International Socialist Organisation have been arrested and the party’s offices

raided. Despite their tactical differences with Tsvangirai’s MDC, all these organisations share a common perspective.

Tsvangirai is a former trade union leader and his party is composed of businessmen and a smattering of union bureaucrats. The MDC advocates free market measures and it has the backing of the United States and European governments.

Unemployment is running at 80 percent and inflation reached 1.7 million percent in April. One third of the population has fled the country in search of work. Many others travel regularly across the border to buy food in neighbouring countries.

The MDC has been able to win support by speaking in general terms about the need for change. It has tapped into a groundswell of hostility to the ZANU-PF regime. But there are no differences of a fundamental class character between ZANU-PF and the MDC. Mugabe himself was able to work with Western governments and the international financial institutions for 20 years. He only rejected their dictates when he realised that he risked undermining his own power of patronage.

On his return from Rome, Mugabe stepped up his anti-imperialist rhetoric. Speaking at the funeral of a veteran of the war against the racist Smith regime, he said “We are prepared to fight for our country or to go to war if we lose it—as happened to our forefathers.”

“Once again we want to make it clear to the British and Americans that we are no one’s subjects and will never be,” said Mugabe. “This country shall not again come under the rule and control of the white man, direct or indirect. Never, ever.”

Mugabe’s pugnacious language is to a great extent a bargaining position as he attempts to cut a deal with Washington and London that will allow him to hold on to power. Despite his strident tone, behind the scenes attempts are being made to establish a government of national unity. Negotiations are going on in South Africa to arrive at a power sharing deal like that established recently in Kenya. According to the *Financial Times* President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan are working for an agreement that would see victory declared for Mugabe.

“Mr Mugabe would then be sworn in for another term as president, but would later agree to step down in favour of a unity government headed by a Zanu-PF leader.”

South Africa is rushing 300,000 tonnes of maize to Zimbabwe ahead of the elections. With the rural population starving, this food may allow Mugabe to tilt the vote in his favour.

For his part, Tsvangirai is attempting to put pressure on Thabo Mbeki to reach a deal favourable to him. He recently wrote to Mbeki accusing him of being unfit to mediate in Zimbabwe.

But the British and US governments have shown no readiness to

accept a compromise that leaves Mugabe in power, and want him to be either deposed or removed in a palace coup.

The US is openly hostile to Mbeki's efforts. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer are looking to President Levy Mwanawasa of Zambia to take over the role of mediator on behalf of the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

At the weekend,, a group of African statesmen, including former presidents of Nigeria, Botswana, Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania and Benin, signed a declaration expressing their concern at the violence in Zimbabwe. The fact that former Mozambican President Joaquim Chissano is among the signatories is significant because in the past he has been close to Mugabe.

President Bush, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany and Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown are said to be demanding that Zimbabwe's neighbours impose an economic blockade. This would include switching off electricity supplies from South Africa. China has come under pressure to break off its economic relations with Zimbabwe.

An unnamed Western diplomat told the Zimbabwe *Guardian*, "One way or another, this summer is likely to mark the endgame for Robert Mugabe."

Mbeki's choice for Mugabe's successor would be Simba Makoni. Makoni split from ZANU-PF to run against Mugabe in the presidential elections. He came in third with about nine percent of the vote. His name has been suggested as a possible president because of the support he retains in ZANU-PF.

Despite the repression that is being directed against their party, the leaders of the MDC have shown themselves willing to accept a government of national unity with ZANU-PF.

Tsvangirai has stressed his readiness to work with the ruling party. "Instead of focusing on what divides us," Tsvangirai said, "We must now try to heal our nation. This means that we can even talk about restoring ZANU-PF."

Nelson Chamisa of the MDC reiterated Tsvangirai's words. "The MDC fishing rod is going to be thrown into all rivers including the ZANU-PF rivers," he said.

If the talks are successful the run off may even be abandoned. An unnamed ZANU-PF insider was quoted in the Harare-based *Financial Gazette* as saying, "It is clear to both ZANU-PF and the MDC that proceeding with the election is more of a zero sum game. Both parties are aware that the solution to the crisis lies in a GNU and so why should we waste resources with this costly charade?"

The political elite are well aware of the danger of attempting to hold an election when the political authority of ZANU-PF has broken down and the country is in economic meltdown. The government's campaign of repression is further alienating the mass of the population from Mugabe's regime.

"We need to establish an authority that will take care of business up until we are able to run an election." Simba Makoni said.

"Even if by the remotest of chances we could have an election whose results would resemble the will of the people, it would still not resolve the crisis." He added. "Neither of the two leaders ... would be able to form an effective government if they won the run-off."

Such is the depth of the economic and political crisis that even the most hard line supporters of Mugabe have begun to doubt their ability to ensure a victory for him. A group of war veterans has also called for the second round of the presidential elections to be suspended. Chris Pasipamire, spokesman for Mwana Wevhu—the Revolutionary

Council—said that Zimbabwe cannot afford an election. Mwana Wevhu is sponsored by First Lady Grace Mugabe.

The clique around Mugabe has enriched itself fabulously. Leading military figures profited from the invasion of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where they seized mineral and logging rights. The redistribution of white-owned commercial farms has benefited those close to Mugabe, who have received land in return for their loyalty.

But there are factions of ZANU-PF that would be prepared to ditch Mugabe because he has become a liability and threatens their ability to act as the local representatives of global capital.

The group of businessmen and trade union officials around Tsvangirai simply want their share of power and the wealth that goes with it. They have broken with Mugabe because they see him as being out of step with the global financial interests that want to make use of Zimbabwe's resources. With every day that goes by the potential profit to be gained from Zimbabwe's farmland and mineral resources increases as commodity prices rise. They have no objections to sharing power if the returns are great enough.

Such are the rivalries between the MDC and ZANU-PF that it may not be possible for them to establish a government of national unity. But that there is a desire to do so at all reflects the fear that all sections of the Zimbabwean political elite have of the urban working class and rural poor. The election revealed a rising tide of anger and hostility toward the old regime. For the present Tsvangirai has been the beneficiary of that anger, but he cannot be unaware of the fact that his economic programme would be unwelcome to the majority of Zimbabweans once its implications were understood.

Tsvangirai has consistently refused to mobilise mass opposition to Mugabe because he is afraid that such a movement would get out of his control. He is willing to countenance sharing power with Mugabe and his cronies because he knows that he may need their proven ruthlessness to enforce the kind of economic measures he plans to introduce.

The International Monetary Fund Structural Adjustment Plan that Tsvangirai advocates would mean destroying the few jobs that remain in the public sector, privatising the parastatals that still run utility services and opening up Zimbabwean agriculture to the world market. Tsvangirai's backers in the West have made it clear that they want the money supply controlled to halt inflation. That would mean savage pay cuts and the further destruction of social conditions. Such a programme could not be imposed without provoking mass opposition.



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