



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Zimbabwe
June 2009

In Zimbabwe ... the situation remains critical and considerable humanitarian assistance is needed.

-- Pope Benedict XVI, January 8, 2009

BACKGROUND

Over the last nine years the government of Zimbabwe, led by President Robert Mugabe, has carried out a reign of repression over this once free and prosperous country of 11 million people. Inflation once the highest in the world was only ended when the country abandoned the Zimbabwe currency for the U.S. Dollar. The economy has shrunk by 60%; unemployment is about 85%, and 90% of the population lives in poverty (ICG). Up to a third of the country's 12 million people have fled the country for political and economic reasons and have taken refuge in neighboring countries (many in South Africa), Europe and the U.S.. Zimbabwe is also suffering from the effects of the worst harvest in memory. The World Food Program estimates that 7 million people will rely on food aid in 2009, up from 5.1 million last year.

Health conditions in Zimbabwe have deteriorated. The HIV infection rate is 25%; life expectancy has plummeted from 60 years in 1990 to 37 years today. Hospitals have been shut down and medical supplies are increasingly scarce. Qualified medical personnel are leaving the country or working privately at high costs affordable only by the wealthy in Harare, the capital. The crumbling infrastructure has contributed to a cholera outbreak that has infected about 90,000 people killing at least 4,000 (World Health Organization). The city's water has been cut off because of a lack of purification chemicals and in some areas sewage runs in the streets.

The situation deteriorated further in the wake of the March 29, 2008 elections. In the first round opposition party leader Morgan Tsvangirai (Movement for Democratic Change - MDC) won 47.9% of the vote to Mugabe's 43.2% (Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front ZANU-PF). The opposition originally claimed to have won over 50% of the vote, making their candidate the outright winner. They called for President Mugabe to step down, assuring him that he would not be prosecuted and could retire in peace.

Mugabe's party, ZANU-PF, launched a campaign of intimidation and terror against persons who they believed voted for the opposition. Opposition party leaders were imprisoned and beaten while their offices were raided and ransacked. Human Rights Watch reported that around 163 people were killed and 5,000 beaten, or tortured.

The runoff election was held on June 27, 2008. In an internationally condemned contest that was severely flawed by massive intimidation and violence (and from which Tsvangirai withdrew citing political violence), Mugabe was reelected with 85.5% of the vote to Tsvangirai's 9.3%. Britain and the United States proposed a UN resolution sanctioning the leaders of Zimbabwe, but it was vetoed by China and Russia. In September, Mugabe and Tsvangirai negotiated a Global Political Agreement whereby Mugabe retained the presidency and Tsvangirai became prime minister. The Southern African Development Community (SADC), a loose alliance of nine states in Southern Africa, continued mediation efforts until early February 2009 when the MDC agreed to join the unity government.

Despite the deep divisions between the two parties in the unity government, Morgan Tsvangirai and his party have had some limited success and that offers Zimbabweans a faint hope for better times ahead. They have eliminated inflation and food is back in many stores. The government claims to have gotten teachers to return to schools and civil servant salaries paid thanks to new credit lines from SADC. In contrast, ZANU-PF continues to arrest MDC officials, disrupts commercial farms and regularly violates the terms of the political agreement. SADC, the guarantor of the agreement, has not been able to resolve these problems.

Although the U.S. and the U.K. have been encouraged by the unity government they have also argued that it is time for Mugabe to step down. ZANU-PF leaders still maintain a disproportionate amount of political power with control over the military, the police and the central bank (and the hard currency that passes through it). Donor nations have not lifted their targeted sanctions (travel bans and asset freezes on ZANU-PF members of government) and refuse to provide the \$10 billion requested by the government unless political reform is undertaken and accountability for funds can be insured. Prime Minister Tsvangirai has conducted a tour of Western donor countries and met with U.S. President Obama who promised \$73 million in humanitarian aid, but no assistance to or through government structures.

USCCB POSITION

The USCCB continues to work closely with and support the leadership of the Church in Zimbabwe during these challenging times. The Church there is in a difficult position because political conditions in Zimbabwe are threatening and neighboring countries, Europe and the United States have very limited influence

In May 2008, Bishop Thomas Wenski, then Chairman of the USCCB International Committee, wrote to the Bishops of Zimbabwe to support their calls for an end to the violence and the release of election results. Bishop Wenski also wrote a letter to then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to share a joint statement from the Christian Leaders of Zimbabwe. Bishop John Ricard visited Zimbabwe in August 2008 to meet with the Bishop's Conference to express the USCCB's solidarity with the Church of Zimbabwe. Bishop Howard Hubbard, Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, and Bishop John Ricard will visit Zimbabwe in August of 2009.

ACTION REQUESTED

The USCCB urges the U.S. Government to:

1. Assist and encourage the Southern African Development Community, especially South Africa, to provide leadership and mediation to improve the chances for an effective unity government and to bring a peaceful end to the crisis in Zimbabwe.
2. Work with other members of the international community, especially the United Kingdom, the European Union, China and Russia to pressure the Robert Mugabe administration to transition peacefully to a legitimate government that will serve the common good of the Zimbabwean people.
3. Increase humanitarian assistance to the millions of Zimbabweans who are suffering.
4. Actively monitor the actions of Unity Government, pressuring for specific progress on human rights and economic and political reform, and standing ready to support a more responsible unity government and, over the longer term, a transition to a new, legitimate, democratic government in Zimbabwe.

For information: visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/callafrica/zimbabwe.shtml> or contact *Stephen Hilbert*, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3149, Shilbert@usccb.org.