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Fresh insights into the Zimbabwean situation

MISTRUST HAMPERS SADC MEDIATION EFFORT

The South African president will have to work hard to persuade Zimbabwe's government and opposition to talk to one another — and even to him.

By Takesure Dengu in Harare

Mutual mistrust and suspicion remain the two key obstacles to a negotiated political settlement in Zimbabwe, say analysts. A third challenge facing South African president Thabo Mbeki, who is leading the latest mediation attempt by Zimbabwe's neighbours, will be persuading the personalities who will be involved in any talks to put their egos to one side.

Credit: Lazele

A vendor stands outside Gwanzura Stadium in Harare, the venue for the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions' May Day celebrations. Picture taken May 1.

Police attacks on opposition leaders and their supporters on March 11 led to an international outcry against the deteriorating human rights situation in Zimbabwe. The United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand cranked up pressure on Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe to give his opponents breathing space to operate, and threatened more "targeted sanctions" against the regime's elite.

The traditionally lethargic Southern African Development Community, SADC, called an emergency summit in the Tanzanian capital of Dar es Salaam on March 28-29 at which they privately made Mugabe aware of their concerns about the TV images showing a badly beaten Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader

NEWS IN BRIEF

- **The International Monetary Fund said this week that official annual inflation data have been substantially understated, to the extent that in February, when the government said the year-on-year rate had hit 1,730 per cent, the actual figure had was closer to 3,000%. The official March inflation figure of 2,200 per cent suggests a realistic figure of over 4,000 per cent.**
- **Rights group Human Rights Watch this week documented police assaults on political activists and ordinary people in recent months. "Arbitrary arrests, detentions and brutal beatings by police and security forces skyrocketed in March and April and continue unabated," the report said.**
- **President Robert Mugabe attacked a recent statement from the Catholic Bishops' Conference which said he continued to use oppressive laws inherited from Ian Smith's Rhodesia. In an interview in the New African magazine published this month, Mugabe dismissed the statement, which took the form of a pastoral letter, as "political nonsense", and threatened that his government would treat the bishops as political figures because of the approach they had adopted.**
- **Zimbabwean media celebrated World Press Freedom Day on May 3 in the face of harsh laws that have made the country one of the worst places in the world for journalists to operate in. The laws include the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, the Official Secrets Act and the Broadcasting Services Act. Several journalists are recovering from severe beatings administered to them while in police custody in March.**

of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

Although the president tried to downplay this ticking-off when he reported back to ZANU-PF supporters at home, and went on to secure endorsement from the party's Central Committee as its sole candidate in next year's presidential election, South Africa's Mbeki has said Mugabe was told that what was happening in Zimbabwe was "not acceptable".

The biggest problem facing Mbeki is an abiding atmosphere of mistrust.

Mugabe's talks with the SADC were was followed by more arrests, beatings, abductions and torture of opposition activists accused of bombing state infrastructure and police stations.

SADC heads of state appointed Mbeki to mediate between the MDC and the ruling ZANU-PF. Mbeki has set up a five-member team to consider how such a negotiation process would work.

According to sources close to Mbeki, when he met the secretary-generals of the MDC's two factions in Johannesburg in mid-April, he refused to deal with them as separate factions. Instead, he told them he wanted to address them as a united party, and then take their common demands to the ZANU-PF leadership.

A political analyst in Harare said the biggest problem facing Mbeki was the abiding atmosphere of mistrust. ZANU-PF accuses the MDC of being a front for the West, while the opposition party returns the animosity, and also remains suspicious of the South African leader's credentials as an impartial broker.

"The MDC has always had problems with Thabo Mbeki since his earlier involvement in the Zimbabwean crisis," said the analyst, who asked not to be named. "They don't trust Mbeki, in the first place because they think he is too close to Mugabe. Secondly, they don't trust his so-called 'quiet diplomacy', whereby Mbeki has refused to openly criticise Mugabe's brutal rule."

By contrast, a ZANU-PF insider told IWPR that "Mbeki is welcome to discuss our challenges with us. We are neighbours. We help each other in times of need."

Speaking on condition of anonymity, the party insider repeated the official line that the MDC exists only to advance western interests.

"It is up to them to prove they are Zimbabwean. Why do they always appeal to foreigners whenever there is a problem at home? They must renounce their western roots and denounce the sanctions which are hurting our people if they want to talk to us," he said.

He was dismissive of the MDC's demand for a new constitution, and refused to say whether ZANU-PF would consider the issue if it were put on the agenda of the proposed talks.

"They rejected a new constitution in 2000. Have they changed their mind now? What are they proposing?" he asked. "It is their problem. Comrade Mugabe has said the current constitution is sacrosanct and non-negotiable."

A foreign diplomat based in Harare, who did not want to be named, said there was a need for compromise on both sides. He said it was wrong to declare any issue out of bounds in a negotiating process.

"For the sake of progress and for the good of the country, Tsvangirai will have to accept a face-to-face meeting with Mugabe. He can't avoid him," he said. "If it means recognising him as head of state, he will have to. After all Mugabe, has only a few months as president if he is defeated in next year's election."

He said there was a chance that the South African president would be able to persuade Mugabe to meet his nemesis Tsvangirai at some stage.

"If Mugabe has accepted that there is a crisis in his country and wants financial help from SADC, he cannot afford to humiliate those trying to help," he said. " Zimbabwe is unlikely to get help from the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund so long as there is no acceptable political settlement."

To sum up, he said, "These are the pressures on both leaders. They will have to subordinate their egos to the national good. It would be unfortunate to squander this window of opportunity and allow the situation to get worse than it already is now, or the institutions of the state will start to collapse completely."

"It would be unfortunate to squander this window of opportunity" — foreign diplomat.

The MDC says it might boycott next year's joint parliamentary and presidential elections if no major constitutional reforms take place before then, and if draconian laws like the Public Order and Security Act and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act have not been repealed.

The party is also calling for fair elections under international supervision, and for the opposition to be given access to state-run media.

Overcoming the gulf between the MDC's demands and the Mugabe administration's refusal to budge presents a huge challenge to the South African leader.

"Mbeki's mediation skills will be put to the test," said the Harare-based analyst. "He cannot afford to fail again. Nobody in the region wants this crisis to continue."

Takesure Dengu is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

GRIM HOSPITAL HIGHLIGHTS HEALTHCARE CRISIS

The reception area of a big hospital in Harare is a theatre of agony.

By Norman Chitapi in Harare

Harare's Parirenyatwa Hospital is the biggest referral hospital in the country. It looks majestic from the outside. Inside, its grand wooden staircases run alongside elevators that have long ceased to function. One could safely drive a bus through its wide French doors and vast, spotlessly clean corridors.

But there is a sinister aspect to the cleanliness. Like the health system in the country generally, this great hospital is dying. There are no qualified and experienced doctors, nurses, technicians or drugs here. Parirenyatwa Hospital is a monument to the country's relentless economic decline over the past eight years.

The western entrance to the hospital, which gives access to the casualty department, is symbolic of the collapse of this once proud institution, formerly named Andrew Fleming Hospital when it was built to serve the white community under Ian Smith's regime. In 1965, Smith, the white minority leader of what was then Rhodesia, declared unilateral independence from Britain.

The hospital reception is a theatre of agony — adults weep, the injured groan and women who have just lost loved ones wail as new arrivals line up to be served by a group of listless nurses. Along the corridors, the nurses and their assistants babble about their personal affairs, seemingly oblivious to the patients they took an oath to serve.

Above the benches where the patients wait, computer-generated cards bearing the message "Get well soon" are stuck on the wall. There is a macabre irony to the message. There is hardly a doctor at Parirenyatwa to attend to patients. The auxiliary nurses and student doctors manage as best they can. But much of the time, they stand around in the corridors unable to help patients who are in need of urgent specialist attention.

Credit: Lazele

The entrance to Parirenyatwa Hospital.

Parirenyatwa Hospital is a monument to Zimbabwe's relentless economic decline.

What the cards really mean is, "You get well soon, or you die".

Betty Choto recently went to Parirenyatwa Hospital with a kidney ailment. For two days, she writhed on a bed without treatment. On the third day, she was told by a nurse that she needed to be put onto an intravenous drip before she could be operated on. Treatment was on a cash up front basis. Each sachet of the precious liquid cost 180,000 Zimbabwean dollars (about nine US dollars on the black market), beyond the reach of many people in a country where 80 per cent of the adult population is unemployed, and more live on less than one US dollar a day.

Relatives who visited that evening found Choto in agony. Fortunately, she was able to tell her story, and as soon as the money was paid a junior doctor wheeled up a trolley to administer the drip. She underwent an operation the following day and was quickly discharged to recover at her home in the poor township of Kuwadzana, 15 kilometres west of Parirenyatwa.

But her problems were not over. The following day, she was driven to Kuwadzana council clinic to have the wound dressed. After waiting in the queue for two hours, she was told the clinic didn't have the chemicals needed to clean the wound. "You bring your own drugs and we dress you," she was told. They used an over-the-counter medication trading as Betadine to clean up and bandage the

Credit: Lazele

A man at the May Day event at Gwanzura Stadium. Picture taken May 1.

wound, before she left in search of the correct substance for the following day. The nurses did not have it even for purchase on the black market.

The practice of health personnel sourcing essential drugs from neighbouring countries and selling them at exorbitant prices to desperate patients is on the increase.

"You bring your own drugs and we dress you," said nurses.

Another resident of Kuwadzana, Netsai Juru, was taken to Kuwadzana clinic when she thought she was in labour. The nurse on duty briefly examined her, pronounced the foetus dead and called a council ambulance to take her to Harare Hospital, the main referral centre for the capital's poor.

On the way to the hospital, the ambulance stopped to pick up two other patients. She was kept for a day in the antenatal wing and although no baby arrived, there was no talk of a dead foetus.

On the second day, Juru was told the baby was getting tired and she needed to be induced to speed up the delivery, or else a caesarean section would have to be performed. She was told that the pill to induce delivery would cost 150,000 Zimbabwean dollars, and that only one nurse had it. After paying two-thirds of the cost, she was given a portion of the pill. It didn't do the trick, and as the agony worsened on day three, she went in for a caesarean, and produced a baby boy.

The total bill came to one million Zimbabwean dollars. Her salary as a civil servant is around to 400,000 Zimbabwean dollars a month. She paid a third of the bill and was released with a reminder to pay off the rest.

The government promised "health for all" by the year 2000.

Things were not always this bad. In the early Eighties, the government introduced a policy promising "health for all" by the year 2000. But as spending on social services such as health and education began to outstrip revenue, the country was forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund in 1991, which called for an economic structural adjustment programme that demanded a reduction in spending on social services.

The austerity measures resulted in a huge reduction in government grants to hospitals and council clinics, and a shortage of drugs and equipment.

As the economic situation deteriorated, qualified doctors, nurses and other support staff deserted the health sector in droves for the United Kingdom, South Africa and Botswana.

A government plan to take over council-run clinics has met with universal cynicism.

The few remaining doctors and nurses went on strike for better pay and working conditions in December 2006. Although the strike ended in March, health professionals began a "go-slow", meaning they are not offering a full service and are opting to work at their surgeries or do locums elsewhere.

Meanwhile, HIV and other treatable diseases like malaria are also proving fatal in the absence of basic drugs and a committed, well-trained workforce.

The promise and euphoria that followed Zimbabwean independence has faded into a long and debilitating wait for many people. The government's announcement in April that it wanted to take over council-run clinics "to improve service delivery" was met with universal cynicism. "Why are they unable to improve service at their own hospitals first, before spreading the few resources they have?" was a question asked by many.

Norman Chitapi is the pseudonym of an IWPR contributor in Zimbabwe.

MUGABE SILENT OVER MDC TALKS

President's independence anniversary speech sidesteps negotiations with the opposition.

By Norman Chitapi in Harare

Those hoping that President Robert Mugabe would shed light on the burning issue of talks between the ruling ZANU-PF and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, during his April 20 independence anniversary address were left disappointed.

Local observers and diplomats were looking for clarity from the Zimbabwean leader following dismissive comments from The Voice, the ZANU-PF mouthpiece, which said earlier in the week that no talks would take place until the MDC stopped acting like "puppets of the West".

Credit: Lazele

Mugabe at last month's Independence Day celebrations at Rufaro Stadium. Picture taken April 18.

MDC protests show a new "militant criminal strain" — Mugabe.

During his address to 40,000 people at the Rufaro stadium in Harare to mark 27 years of independence, Mugabe made no mention of negotiations. Nevertheless, he made clear his line of attack in any future talks, accusing MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai of being under the influence of western leaders and describing the MDC protests last month as indicative of a new "militant criminal strain" in local politics, which he said would be dealt with firmly by the police.

Mugabe said although the whole of Africa had declared him properly elected in 2002, Tsvangirai had chosen to go along with the verdict of western leaders who said the election had been rigged, therefore challenging his legitimacy. This had led to the imposition of so-called targeted sanctions on Mugabe and senior members of his party and government.

"President Mugabe lives in a fool's paradise," quipped a western diplomat after the address, which saw Mugabe laying the blame for Zimbabwe's economic woes at many doors — except that of his own government.

"President Mugabe lives in a fool's paradise" — western diplomat.

The diplomat said Mugabe was misinformed if he believed that targeted sanctions were the source of the country's economic meltdown, "This is an economy that has been badly managed for a long time. The economic crisis in Zimbabwe began well before the MDC was formed. How then can he blame sanctions over his disputed re-election, when they were only imposed in 2002 and are directed at a few individuals?"

"Very soon we will catch up with you," Mugabe warned those involved in smuggling precious minerals.

In vague acknowledgement of the failure of his land reform policy, which saw white farmers removed from their farms and replaced with ZANU-PF supporters, Mugabe did warn that people who had been "resettled" over the past seven years but have failed to become productive farmers would be kicked off the land.

To placate a restless civil service, Mugabe said his administration was providing subsidised transport and had set up a fund to build houses for government workers.

He attributed the decline in the country's once buoyant tourism industry to veldt fires last year. And against widespread evidence that declining mineral production was caused by price distortions and a skewed exchange rate, Mugabe blamed the slump on smuggling of precious minerals "by some of our greedy people".

"Mugabe wants Tsvangirai to recognise him as the legitimate president" — local analyst.

"Very soon we will catch up with you," he warned. "How can you have a [Mercedes-] Benz for yourself, for your wife, for your child and for your nephew? Where did you get the money?"

In the past, similar remarks have remained empty threats. Critics blame the smuggling mainly on people in Mugabe's inner circle, and therefore expect no action.

Mugabe reiterated his desire for government to take a 51 per cent shareholding in foreign companies operating in Zimbabwe, a threat which has stalled further investment in the mining sector in the past two years.

He blamed the country's inflationary scourge on government opponents seeking to turn the people against the state. He said the retail and manufacturing sectors were hiking prices without any regard to real production costs — and that they were doing this "to cause disquiet across sectors of our society".

Whether Mugabe's ongoing discourse of blame will scupper any chances for talks between the ruling ZANU-PF and the MDC remains to be seen.

As a Harare-based analyst commented, "Mugabe wants Tsvangirai to recognise him as the legitimate president of the country. Once that happens, there would be no need for western governments to maintain so-called targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe." The analyst believed that such a concession, though not inconceivable, would be hard to extract from the MDC, as it formed the "very foundation of its international lobby".

He said the only reason the MDC would make such a climb-down would be to extract electoral reforms ahead of next year's ballot. "Time is not on their side, and the MDC needs all the time it can get to prepare for the joint elections in 2008," said the analyst. "They wouldn't want to be bogged down in negotiations at the expense of a new constitution, voter registration and a level playing field."

Mbeki-led mediation "the best chance Zimbabwe has to get out of this quagmire" — foreign diplomat.

The diplomat said that mediation between ZANU-PF and the MDC by South African president Thabo Mbeki needed everybody's support to succeed. "This is the best chance Zimbabwe has to get out of this quagmire. The leaders will need to approach the whole process with a positive attitude, otherwise it is doomed," he said.

Norman Chitapi is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

The Zimbabwe Crisis Report is an initiative of IWPR-Africa's Zimbabwe Programme. This programme promotes democratization and good governance with Southern Africa and contributes to the development of a culture of human rights and the rule of law. Focusing on Zimbabwe the programme has three core components — information provision, capacity building and dissemination and distribution.

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