

ZIMBABWE ELECTIONS: 14 – 24 FEBRUARY 2008

This week the Solidarity Peace Trust begins a regular election update, which will summarise into general categories the notable events and quotes of the last week to ten days, as Zimbabwe heads into a now highly fluid and unpredictable election. Sources are media articles from both government and independent media published within the dates of the summary, as well as statements from civic groups.

WHAT THEY SAID

TSVANGIRAI ON MAKONI: Zimbabwean opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai on Wednesday declared he would work with anyone who opposed the dictatorship of President Robert Mugabe while denouncing former ruling party presidential candidate Simba Makoni as tainted goods. The MDC leader welcomed Makoni to the ranks of the opposition and reminded him that opposition leaders in Zimbabwe face arrest, beatings, tear gas and treason trials. Tsvangirai then hit hard at Makoni, saying that the former finance minister had taken too long to finally speak out about the situation in Zimbabwe. Tsvangirai accused Makoni of saying nothing during Operation Murambatsvina, when the government destroyed homes and businesses, displacing nearly a million people. He also said Makoni watched while people were tortured, teargassed and opposition members were beaten. "Makoni knows this, he's seen it from the safety of the ZANU-PF Politburo. He may soon experience it first hand", said Tsvangirai. (SWRadio, 14 Feb)

MAKONI ON MAKONI said that Zimbabwe needed fresh leadership to "heal the wounds" of 28 years of President Robert Mugabe's rule. Makoni, who declared his candidacy recently, predicts a landslide win against Mugabe based on a campaign platform of reviving the battered economy and restoring political freedoms and property rights. The biggest tasks, he said, will be to lift Zimbabwe out of its deep economic crisis and "national despair". The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, which runs the elections, reported an increase in the number of new voter registrations this week. Makoni claims credit for the surge. (Press conference, 15 Feb)

MUTAMBARA ON MAKONI: "It must be understood within the opposition that there is absolutely no alternative to working together. Self-serving bickering and infighting among the democratic forces must be shunned. All political leaders must put national interest before self interest. The two MDC formations have neither monopoly of political wisdom, nor the immutable right to represent the people of Zimbabwe... Even if reunification of the two MDC formations is achieved, it is not enough, to dislodge Zanu PF. We have to grow the democratic forces beyond the traditional MDC support base. This should be done by attracting reform minded people from within Zanu PF, other political parties, and those who are not currently in active party politics. Furthermore there should be enhanced cooperation with Zimbabwe civic society organizations, thus unlocking synergies amongst all democratic forces. Organizations such as NCA, Crisis Coalition, ZCTU, ZINASU, WOZA, MOZA, Women Coalition, and the Churches have shown spectacular courage under vicious attacks." (MDC release)

CIO ON MAKONI: Mugabe's men plan to sabotage Simba Makoni's bid for the Presidency: "Assign your trusted operatives to ensure a tough ride for Makoni... Place Makoni, his financial backers and disgruntled civil servants who might support him under top 24 hour surveillance. Employ all RDWK (Real dirty work) strategies without restraint. Mobilise street kids in urban areas, hire them, then plant them at all Makoni's rallies to cause violence. The police will be on hand to arrest rioters. Those arrested will be detained in jails until after the elections." "Without restraint" are the key words in the above paragraph. We know what that means. Intimidation, violence, beatings..... "In rural areas keep track on Non-Governmental Organisations when distributing relief food. Ensure that no non-card

carrying Zanu-PF individual gets food. Feed villagers with any tarnishing information on Makoni that you can think of." (Extract from alleged CIO document, Zimbabwe Today, 15 Feb)

MUGABE ON MAKONI- HE'S A PROSTITUTE: Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe on Thursday derided a former ally now challenging him in general elections as a prostitute, and said he would win next month's polls by a landslide and humble the opposition. "What has happened now is absolutely disgraceful. I didn't think that Makoni, after all this experience, would behave like this," Mugabe said in an interview broadcast on state television late on Thursday to mark his 84th birthday. "I compared him to a prostitute. A prostitute could have done better than Makoni, because she has clients. Don't you think so?" said Mugabe. (Reuters, 22 Feb)

... AND A (BRITISH SPONSORED) FROG: at his birthday party celebrations in Beitbridge, Mugabe likened Makoni to an ambitious frog, telling the story of a frog who tried to punish a cow that had squashed her tadpole. The frog tried to expand to the size of the cow and exploded. Mugabe claimed Makoni's campaign was being bankrolled by Australia and Britain who were sponsoring him through non-governmental organisations. (The Sunday News, 24 Feb)

TSVANGIRAI ON MUGABE - PROSECUTE: President Robert Mugabe may face prosecution if he loses the forthcoming poll as the Morgan Tsvangirai-led MDC has said it will establish a Truth and Justice Commission if it wins. The commission to investigate human rights abuses in the country since Independence would recommend the prosecution of the perpetrators of human rights violations, the party said. In its policy document to be launched alongside the party's manifesto in Mutare tomorrow, the MDC said there have been four main periods of gross human rights abuse in the country perpetrated by Mugabe's government. The MDC said the commission would investigate the 1980-87 Gukurahundi campaign, the 2000 land reform programme that resulted in the destruction of 10 000 farming properties, the 2005 clean-up operation, and the "violence and destruction of property during the struggle to restore democracy in Zimbabwe between 1998 and 2008. (Zim Ind, 22 Feb)

NCA ON OPPOSITION: The National Constitutional Assembly has noted a letter published recently on the Zimbabwe Standard claiming that the organisation is fully behind the MDC led by Morgan Tsvangirai. The NCA would want to clarify to individuals and the country at large that the organisation does not support any political formation but support principles, values and processes that can usher in new people driven constitution and a democratic dispensation in Zimbabwe. The NCA since it finds Morgan Tsvangirai of the MDC being the only presidential candidate who has fought with the people for a people driven constitution renders its support to him. (NCA, 19 Feb)

MOYO ON MUTAMBARA: The independent MP for Tsholotsho Professor Jonathan Moyo is furious with the MDC faction led by Arthur Mutambara after it fielded a candidate to challenge him in Tsholotsho North against a reported "gentlemen's agreement" that he would be left a clean field to fight Zanu PF. The MDC faction led by Morgan Tsvangirai did not field a candidate in the constituency for the March 29 elections. Mgezelwa Ncube successfully filed his nomination papers on Friday to stand against Moyo -- sending a clear indication that the opposition faction had reneged on the unwritten pact. (New Zimbabwe, 20 Feb)

MADHUKU ON MUGABE: Constitutional lawyer Lovemore Madhuku told IWPR that Mugabe's supporters were not imaginary. "Mugabe still has a lot of supporters and if you look at the election trend, you will find that he has maintained the same number over the last three elections. I also meet with [the ruling party] ZANU-PF - he has a lot of supporters, like it or not. The support he has is real and not fiction." While the vast majority of Zimbabweans are struggling to survive, President Robert Mugabe still has a strong support base which is willing to risk everything, including their lives and businesses, to ensure that the octogenarian leader remains in power. (IWPR, 21 Feb)

MAKONI-TSVANGIRAI ALLIANCE? Informed sources said a meeting between Makoni and Tsvangirai is set for Sunday to discuss ways of joining forces to confront Mugabe at the polls. Last Sunday Makoni met another MDC faction leader Arthur Mutambara to seal an informal electoral pact. Makoni and Mutambara, who dropped out of the presidential race to back his new ally, reinforced

their working arrangement. Although Mutambara might not have a power base, MPs aligned to him command sizeable grassroots support. The Mutambara camp's MPs are likely to retain their seats in Bulawayo which is their stronghold. Parliamentary election candidates working with Makoni and Mutambara are not challenging each other. (Zim Ind, 22 Feb)

MAKONI-TSVANGIRAI – NO ALLIANCE: MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai will not be meeting with independent presidential candidate Simba Makoni on Sunday, as stated in some press reports. (SW Radio, 23 Feb)

MAKONI ON ALLIANCES: "I am an independent candidate. How can you be an independent and have an alliance at the same time? I don't have to be in an alliance (with political parties). I am with the people and for the people. These people are trade unions, churches, industries, ex-combatants, women, men, the youth. I am in alliance with all these people. I don't need to be fenced, paddocked," (Zim Std 24 Feb)

MDC –T, ON STRATEGIES: Zimbabwe's opposition at the weekend said it would not challenge the outcome of next month's elections in the courts but had an alternative strategy to overturn a rigged election result. Opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party spokesman Nelson Chamisa said: "We have a plan in place. The MDC will use a tried and yet untested (in Zimbabwe) strategy to incapacitate Mugabe," said Chamisa. (Zim Online, 18 Feb)

ZEC ON REGISTRATION OF VOTERS: ZEC officials told IRIN that after Makoni announced he was standing against Mugabe, there was a 10-fold increase in newly registered voters. The winner of the 29 March ballot needs over 50 percent of the vote to avoid a second round run-off with his closest rival. (IRIN, 23 Feb)

NOMINATIONS - AND CAMPAIGNING BEGINS

OVER 700 CONTEST ASSEMBLY SEATS: 730 candidates nationwide successfully registered to contest 210 seats for the House of Assembly (lower house) , and 196 registered to compete for the 60 Senate seats (upper house). ZEC said these numbers were still provisional. Bulawayo is the most highly contested province, followed by Harare.

<i>Bulawayo:</i>	59	to contest 12 lower	6	candidates per seat;
	32	to contest 6 upper	5	per seat.
<i>Harare:</i>	134	to contest 29 lower	4,6	per seat
	24	to contest 6 upper	4	per seat
<i>Midlands:</i>	107	to contest 29 lower	3,6	per seat
	18	to contest upper	3	per seat
<i>Manicaland:</i>	66	to contest 24 lower	3	per seat
	18	to contest 6 upper	3	per seat
<i>Mashonaland Central:</i>	57	to contest 18 lower	3	per seat
	13	to contest 6 upper	2	per seat
<i>Mashonaland East:</i>	76	to contest 23 lower	3	per seat
	15	to contest 6 upper	2,5	per seat
<i>Mashonaland West:</i>	55	to contest 22 lower	2,5	per seat
	19	to contest 6 upper	3	per seat
<i>Masvingo:</i>	90	to contest 25 lower	3,6	per seat
	20	to contest 6 upper	3	per seat
<i>Matabeleland North:</i>	42	to contest 13 lower	3	per seat
	18	to contest 6 upper	3	per seat
<i>Matabeleland South:</i>	44	to contest 13 lower	3	per seat
	19	to contest 6 upper	3	per seat

(The Chronicle, 18 Feb)

TOWUNGANA WHO? A fourth presidential candidate last week filed his nomination papers to contest next month's elections. The Zimbabwe Election Commission presiding officer Ignatius Mushangwe confirmed that Mr. Langton Towungana had successfully lodged his papers. No one seems to know who Towungana is or which party he represents. So far he has not held a press conference or presented his election manifesto. But some analysts believe his entry into mainstream politics is a CIO plot, aimed at trying to dilute the opposition vote. Three others were duly nominated on the same day - Robert Mugabe, the Zanu-PF leader, Simba Makoni, Independent candidate, and Morgan Tsvangirai the MDC president. There was also drama as at the nomination court when Mr Daniel Shumba of the United People's Party, Mr Abel Ndlovu of Peace Action Freedom for All, Mr William Gwata of the Christian Democratic Party and Advocate Justin Chihota were disqualified as presidential candidates. Some of their nomination papers were not in order while others failed to beat the nomination deadline time. (SWRadio, 18 Feb)

MAKONI'S INDEPENDENTS: Makoni's aides said at least 70 independents were standing under his banner in eastern and southern Zimbabwe in the parliamentary elections and began campaigning for him in the presidential race. (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

MANICALAND DISOWNS MAKONI: the ZANU PF Manicaland leadership said Makoni was automatically expelled from the province since announcing his candidature for president. The Politburo recently reaffirmed Makoni's expulsion announced last week. (Chronicle, 15 Feb)

LOYALTY TEST: President Robert Mugabe last week tested the loyalty of senior ZANU-PF officials said to back Simba Makoni by approaching each one of them to sign his nomination papers that were submitted to the Nomination Court last Friday, The Financial Gazette can reveal. President Mugabe had each of the key figures said to be plotting his downfall specifically approached to put down their signatures to endorse his candidacy. Vice President Joice Mujuru, Mashonaland East governor Ray Kaukonde and ZANU-PF national chairman John Nkomo are among those who signed the nomination papers. Sources said politburo members Dumiso Dabengwa and Sikhanyiso Ndlovu, the Information Minister, were also approached. However, they declined to affix their signatures to the nomination papers, in the latest show of defiance. (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

ZANU REBELS: in Masvingo Central House of Assembly constituency, Edison Zvobgo Jnr. registered to contest against the official ZANU-PF candidate, Edward Mhere. Dzikamai Mavhaire and Maina Mandava both registered to contest on a ZANU-PF ticket for the Masvingo senate seat, while Finance Minister Samuel Mumbengegwi registered as a ruling party candidate to challenge Josaya Hungwe in Chivi-Mwenenzi. Transos Huruva and Clifford Mumbengegwi were registered as the two ZANU-PF contestants for the Chivi North House of Assembly seat. In Mutare, Eunice Mangwende-King openly defied ZANU-PF when she stood to challenge official candidate Oppah Muchinguri, the Minister of Gender and Women's Affairs. In Makoni West, former diplomat Nation Madongorere, has been asked to stand down for Joseph Made despite thumping the Agriculture and Mechanisation Minister in party primaries. Madongorere has registered himself as a ZANU-PF candidate, as did Bongayi Nemayire and Sheila Mahere in Makoni North. (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

ZANU REBELS, MATABELELAND: The decision of Vice President Joseph Msika, politburo member Dumiso Dabengwa, and ZANU-PF national chairman John Nkomo not to offer themselves as ZANU-PF candidates in the elections has not helped matters for a party desperate to present a united front. Sikhanyiso Ndlovu, Obert Mpfu, Sithembiso Nyoni, Kembo Mohadi and Tshinga Dube, the chief executive of the Zimbabwe Defence Industries, are the only notable ZANU-PF politicians from Matabeleland contesting the elections. (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

MDC-TSVANGIRAI REBELS: in Midlands Province, MDC-T has registered two candidates in each of 14 constituencies, as supporters within the province remain divided: the 14 extra candidates are

aligned to Patrick Kombayi, MDC-T provincial chairperson, and said they were registering because they were unhappy with the way the other 14 candidates had been unconstitutionally imposed on province structures by Tsvangirai. Last week Kombayi's supporters did not bother to attend a meeting with Tsvangirai to discuss the double candidature issues, preferring to attend a meeting called by provincial structures. This means there are three MDC candidates in these 14 constituencies, as MDC Mutambara has also nominated candidates! In Hwange Central, MDC-T also had two candidates registered to contest after disputes over the primaries – as well as one MDC-M candidate. (*The Chronicle*, 16 and 20 Feb)

ZANU PF VOTE BUYING: Zimbabwe's ruling party, shaken by internal divisions and a potentially strong election challenge to President Robert Mugabe, will expel candidates running against its official nominees in the March vote. The Zimbabwe Election Support Network, an independent observer group, said in its latest bulletin on Monday that its observers countrywide have reported "widespread vote buying in Zanu-PF" in the party's primary elections. Many aspiring candidates are selling scarce commodities such as soap, cooking oil and sugar to the electorate at heavily discounted prices, it said. Near the southern town of Masvingo, a government minister distributed free sports kit and money for school fees. A second minister allegedly promised voters scarce cellphone lines, the support group said. In western Zimbabwe, people attending a ruling-party rally received 50kg bags of corn meal while others were given 10kg bags of rice. (Mail and Guardian, 14 Feb)

VOTE ZANU OR STARVE: About 300 000 tonnes of maize believed to have been imported from Malawi, South Africa and other countries have been stockpiled by Zanu (PF) at GMB depots around the country for vote buying. The party's political commissar was this week preparing to launch the election campaign by President Robert Mugabe this weekend, which includes distributing all sorts of things to the electorate – maize, scotch carts, ox-drawn ploughs and fertilisers... GMB depots in most of Mashonaland had received directives to prepare to release maize stocks they have been hoarding. Senior officials at the GMB depot in Harare confirmed to *The Zimbabwean* that close to 100 000 tonnes of maize were ready to be dispatched for Mugabe's campaign. We also established that depots in Murehwa, Bindura, Chegutu and Marondera have been hoarding stocks. "We have stocks of up to 20 000 tonnes and some of them have been coming through Mozambique. We have been given instructed to start preparing for dispatching the maize," a GMB source at Murehwa depot said. (*Zimbabwean*, 14 Feb)

MAKONI LAUNCH: Simba Makoni pledged to undertake immediate and urgent tasks to resolve the food, power, fuel, water and sanitation problems affecting the country. Makoni said he would crush the black market by removing the structural distortions in the economy. He also expressed need for the independence of the central bank and said he would stop the RBZ from dabbling in quasi-fiscal policies. He promised that his government would initiate a people-driven constitution making process. He also highlighted the need to re-engage the international community as well as bi-lateral and multi-lateral lenders to access desperately needed balance-of-payments support. (*Zimbabwean*, 24 Feb)

MDC- T LAUNCH: in front of over 25 000 people, Tsvangirai unveiled his party's manifesto and announced the MDC would craft a people-driven constitution. He said the MDC's economic revival policy would be centred on the participation of all stakeholders through the Zimbabwe Economic Development Council. He promised to fight against inflation, ensure exchange control stability as a prerequisite to stimulate economic growth. Tsvangirai said his land policy would recognise the country's brutal colonial history of plunder, deal with the injustices and carry out an independent audit of land to establish the status of current holdings. Tsvangirai also promised to compensate the victims of Gukurahundi in which more than 20 000 people were butchered by Mugabe's North Korean-trained 5 Brigade in the 1980s. Upbeat about winning the 29 March elections, the MDC leader also promised free primary education and to address housing, transport problems, empower women and youths as well as deal with the HIV and Aids pandemic. (Zim Std, 24 Feb)

MDC-T LAUNCH – T SHIRT FIGHTS: the launch of Tsvangirai's manifesto was interrupted for thirty minutes when party youths partly destroyed a fence and fought with each other about the distribution of t-shirts at his rally in Mutare. (The Sunday News, 24 Feb)

MDC-M HOLD RALLY: Welshman Ncube, Gibson Sibanda and others held a meeting at Stanley Square where they addressed thousands of supporters. Ncube said that he would consider giving up politics if he lost his campaign to Thoko Khupe in Makokoba. He confirmed that his party will be promoting Simba Makoni for president, while fielding their own MDC candidates in all other positions. (Chronicle, 18 Feb)

PARTY CRACKS TO BE PAPERED OVER: Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF party has resolved to rerun some primary elections in an effort to patch up cracks within the party over who its candidates will be in a number of constituencies beset by divisions, some involving top party officials. Spokesman Nathan Shamuyarira said the party's leadership, which met on Tuesday, acknowledged mistakes in recent hurried primary elections and called a second round of primaries in constituencies in Masvingo, Manicaland and Mashonaland East. In Masvingo alone, 11 members have defied the party, among them Finance Minister Samuel Mumbengengwi and politburo member Dzikamai Mavhaire. (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

SCREEN OUT THE CHANCERS: Zimbabwean authorities are planning constitutional reforms to introduce stringent screening for presidential candidates in the coming elections, a state newspaper reported Sunday. The Sunday Mail quoted an unnamed government source as saying the move was to bar some "presidential chancers" who were using legal loopholes to try their hand at taking over the reins of power from veteran President Robert Mugabe, in office since 1980. The Sunday Mail said under the proposed reforms presidential candidates should be backed by elected members and be able to form a government. (AFP, 19 Feb)

THE ELECTORAL ACT [Chapter 2:13] deals with what happens if no presidential candidate obtains more than 50% of the total number of valid votes cast in the presidential election. *Section 110(2):* "where two or more candidates are nominated and no candidate receives a majority of the total number of valid votes cast, a second election" must be held within 21 days after the previous election. *Section 110(4):* in the second election only the two candidates who received the highest and next highest number of valid votes cast at the first election will be eligible to contest the second election. If these two candidates receive an equal number of votes, Parliament must, as soon as practicable after the declaration of the result of that election, meet as an electoral college and elect one of the two candidates as President by secret ballot and without prior debate. (ZESN)

MUGABE TO FACE RUN OFF? : There is growing uncertainty in Zimbabwe as politicians and analysts realize that President Robert Mugabe is likely to face a run off after the March 29 elections. Harare political scientist Eldred Masungurure says he believes the ruling party - Zanu PF - will try to bring off what he describes as "an electoral coup" when the results of the presidential balloting emerge after the elections next month. He and other independent political analysts do not believe it will be possible for Mr. Mugabe to win an absolute majority, as for the first time in his political career he faces not one, but two strong candidates. (VOA, 19 Feb)

ESCAPE ROUTE?: President Robert Mugabe is believed to have hatched an escape route in the event of a defeat at next month's presidential polls. This is despite assurances from his opponents that he would be granted immunity from prosecution. The ailing 84-year-old has been sounding out some of his African neighbours and his dwindling number of friends abroad about providing him with a safe haven. Mugabe last month told the SADC troika on Politics, Defence and Security that he would not accept an election result that meant the "re-colonisation of Zimbabwe". This has been

interpreted as being a direct reference to the opposition MDC as Mugabe has frequently labelled Tsvangirai a puppet of the British government. (Zimbabwean, 20 Feb)

THE ELECTORAL PLAYING FIELD

VIOLENT POLL: The Zimbabwe Peace Project, presenting the findings of its Violations Early Warning System (Views Project) in Harare at the weekend, predicted that the March 29 polls were likely to be the most violent in the history of the country. (ZPP, 18 Feb)

POISON PURPLE DYE MACHINE: The Mugabe regime has reportedly splashed out US\$2m in scarce foreign currency to import tear-gas and other anti-riot material from China and Israel. According to sources, tear-gas canisters were delivered to the Police Support Unit Headquarters in Harare, together with pepper spray, toxic dye and grenades such as those used on University of Zimbabwe students in 2002. Several students were left with permanent injuries. "These materials are already being distributed to police stations across the whole country," a senior source at PGHQ said. "Some shall be handed over to the army and Police Support Unit. Some we have used before but others, such as a toxic purple dye imported from China, are wholly new to us but compatible with the water canons we have." (Zimbabwean, 18 Feb)

ZESN SUSPENDED: The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission last week barred the Zimbabwe Election Support Network from conducting voter education. Our Harare correspondent Simon Muchemwa told us the ZEC is using an amendment to the electoral act contained in the country's constitution, to stop ZESN from conducting any voter education. 'Apparently there is a law in the constitution that requires anyone wishing to carry out such an exercise to have a licence from the government. There are indications from ZESN that they will soon have that licence so that they can continue with their work,' Muchemwa said. With just six weeks to go before the crucial elections, there are fears ZEC is lagging behind in every department. 'As we speak today, ZEC has yet to publish anywhere the constituency and ward boundaries, the number and location of the polling stations, or how voters can tell which wards they now fall under. It looks like their operations are under financed because they lack capacity in whatever they do,' said Muchemwa. (SWRadio, 18 Feb)

RIGGING NOT SO EASY: John Makumbe. ...Mugabe may find it rather difficult to rig the elections for a number of reasons. For starters, Mugabe and his crumbling party do not really know who their friends and their foes are in this power game come March 29. They do not know who among the persons responsible for the rigging machinery are loyal to Mugabe or to Makoni or to Tsvangirai. They are not certain that the rigging machinery is not just as split as Zanu (PF) is given the numerous independent electoral candidates that filed their nomination papers last Friday. What if some of the key persons responsible for the rigging machinery are more inclined to rig the ballot in favour of either Tsvangirai or Makoni rather than Mugabe? (Zimbabwean, 18 Feb)

FREE AND FAIR - SA: Zimbabwe's elections next month will be free and fair as long as new laws on security and the media are fully implemented, South Africa's Foreign Minister Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma said on Monday. "If the Zimbabweans implement everything that have agreed upon during their negotiations on matters that had kept them apart -- if they implement the laws passed by parliament around security, information, media and all those laws ... the prospects for free and fair elections should be good," she said. (Business Day, SA, 19 Feb)

NOT FREE AND FAIR - MDC: However the opposition has accused President Robert Mugabe's government of failing to follow the new laws in the build-up to a March 29 general election after the authorities tried to ban one of its rallies last month. And despite the new media law, the only daily newspapers and radio or television stations to currently operate are all state-run. Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change has rejected Mbeki's claims the mediation talks have been a success and urged the South African leader to show some "courage" in his dealings with his neighbour Mugabe. (ZimOnline, 19 Feb)

NOT FREE AND FAIR – CCJP: Zimbabwe's Roman Catholic Justice and Peace Commission has called for the postponement of the national elections due on 29 March 2008. They say there are clear signs that the poll will not be free and fair under current conditions. The J&P Commission commented that both the established voter registration process and the requirements for the presidential and parliamentary elections are "cumbersome" and will make it difficult for citizens in many areas of the country to take part. "There has been inadequate preparation and voter education on the electoral process," the Commission declared in a statement released on 16 February. It added that the confusion is compounded by the presidential and parliamentary elections being held simultaneously for the first time. (Ekklesia UK, 18 Feb)

NOT FREE AND FAIR- CA: The Zimbabwe Christian Alliance, a network of church and civic bodies, says it no longer has any hope that inter-party peace talks brokered by South African President Thabo Mbeki will achieve any results before Zimbabwean elections scheduled for 29 March. (CA, 16 Feb)

DEAD DIALOGUE: "The dialogue mandated in March 2007 is dead," said Welshman Ncube, secretary-general of one faction of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). "That dialogue was about creating the conditions for free and fair elections and uncontestably the dialogue has failed." Ncube emphasized that the breakdown was not caused by Mbeki or his team of facilitators being incompetent. "We think that the facilitating team always believed that ZANU-PF would realize what is in the national interest and would respond positively to rational persuasion. In that they were mistaken," he said. The MDC said in a joint statement that the disputed elections would not "yield a legitimate outcome" and called for greater intervention by SADC. "The failure of this dialogue has had the effect of undermining all those who believe in dialogue" as a way of resolving Zimbabwe's political crisis, Ncube said. (International Herald Tribune, 21 Feb)

SA TO OBSERVE: South Africa was fully prepared to send election observers to Zimbabwe if asked, said foreign affairs spokesperson Ronnie Mamoepa on Monday. "If South Africa is invited to take part, either in its own right or as part of the Southern African Development Community, it will not be found wanting," he said. (News24, 18 Feb)

SADC TO OBSERVE: The Southern African Development Community has invited its member states to send observers to take part in the March 29 elections in Zimbabwe in which President Robert Mugabe will seek re-election against two principal rivals. An official of the Southern African Development Community said the organization hopes to deploy a large delegation to Zimbabwe. But the official said that the mission might be deployed later than had been hoped due to some logistical challenges. SADC was instrumental in launching crisis resolution talks between Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF party and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change last March - though after about 11 months of negotiations under South African mediation the negotiations deadlocked over the election date and constitutional reform. The SADC Parliamentary Forum, meanwhile, said it is still waiting for an invitation from the Zimbabwean government to observe the elections. (VOA, 20 Feb)

BRITAIN TO OBSERVE?: Britain called on Tuesday for effective international monitoring of next month's Zimbabwean elections, saying conditions for the poll were "far from free and fair". (Reuters, 19 Feb)

PARALLEL VOTE TABULATION: civil society organisations are exploring possible ways of detecting vote rigging in next month's presidential, parliamentary and council elections. The organisations are weighing views on how Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) can best be implemented for the first time in Zimbabwe. PVT is an election-monitoring method for projecting voting results. It is best known in the United States as a "quick count". Under the system, all information or election data comes from direct observation of the election process. Observers watch the voting and counting

processes at specifically selected polling stations. They then record key information on standardised forms and report their findings, including vote count at polling stations, to a central data collection centre. (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

WHERE IS VOTER EDUCATION? The Electoral Laws Amendment Act section 15A says of the provision of voter education by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC): “Not later than ninety days before polling day in any election, the Commission shall begin a programme of voter education directed at the electorate in the election.” Last week, ZEC barred independent groups from conducting voter education, even though its own education campaign is barely discernible on the ground. (Fingaz 21 Feb)

NO MONEY FOR ZEC: information on the election has been slow to get out. ZEC spokesperson Utoile Silaigwana told the Mail & Guardian that the commission could not find enough staff to deploy as voter educators; this is not too surprising, given that the job only pays Z\$10-million per day, the equivalent of R8 at the black market rate. Each voter will get four different ballots, each a different colour, for elections for local government, the two houses of parliament and president. And with a new localised voters’ roll, voters will be required to vote at prescribed voting stations. However, the ZEC has yet to publish a full list of the polling stations. (Mail and Guardian 21 Feb)

WHERE IS FAIR MEDIA COVERAGE? The Act says in section 16C (1) that public broadcasters Shall ensure “fair and balanced allocation of time between each political party and independent candidate”, and that “each political party and independent candidate is allowed a reasonable opportunity to present a case through the broadcasting service concerned”. But far from this happening, over the past week, the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) has gone full throttle into campaigning for ZANU-PF. In its latest report, the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe (MMPZ) observed that the state media’s news coverage remains slanted. “As in previous weeks, ZANU-PF electoral preparations continued to receive more attention in the government media than all its opponents combined. For example, of the 48 stories ZBC carried on the subject, 43 were on ruling party activities and only five on the opposition.” (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

DAILY NEWS TO RETURN?: Associated Newspapers of Zimbabwe (ANZ) publishers of the banned Daily News and Daily News on Sunday have filed a fresh application with the state-controlled Media and Information Commission (MIC) in their protracted battle to be registered to operate in terms of the repressive Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA). The fresh application was filed on 14 February 2008 raising hope for the return of the two publications that have been out of circulation since September 2003 following the Supreme Court’s “dirty hands” judgment in which it ruled that ANZ was operating illegally as it was not registered with the MIC in terms of AIPPA. John Gambanga, ANZ chief executive officer, expressed confidence that they would be granted an operating licence by the end of March this year. (SWRadio 19 Feb)

BBC BANNED - AGAIN: Under the amended AIPPA, foreign journalists will be allowed into the country and will have the right to accreditation for up to 60 days. Local journalists, meanwhile, will be able to work without first registering with the official Media and Information Commission, MIC - soon to be reconstituted as the Zimbabwe Media Commission as part of the changes to the law. If the authorities stick to the spirit and letter of these legislative changes, foreign media will be able to cover the March presidential, parliamentary and local elections to an extent unprecedented in recent years. This would be a significant change, coming at a time when concern has been expressed that the crucial vote could take place far from international scrutiny as President Mugabe seeks to extend his hold on power. However, it is already looking doubtful that the authorities will abide by their own rules. Information Minister Sikhanyiso Ndlovu recently confounded the hopes of Bulawayo journalists by telling them that those media organisations deemed “hostile” would still not be allowed to cover the polls. The BBC, in particular, has been singled out for exclusion from

Zimbabwe on the grounds that its longstanding mission is to “peddle falsehoods” about the Mugabe regime. (IWPR, 19 Feb)

ACCREDITATION FOR JOURNALISTS: ZEC announced that from 19th Feb up to election day, their Observer’s Accreditation Committee would accredit observers and journalists. Foreign observers would pay US\$ 300, as would foreign journalists. Observers and journalists from Africa would pay US\$ 100, while local observers would pay Z\$ 10 million. Local journalists did not have to pay. ZEC would not be inviting observers: foreign observers would be invited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and local observers would be invited by the Ministry of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs. (Chronicle, 16 Feb)

ZEC TO MONITOR MEDIA: ZEC is mandated to monitor coverage of the elections and will come up with regulations for free and fair coverage. They have consulted widely with different media houses. They expect fair and equitable cover of all candidates and for broadcasters to adhere to SADC guidelines for media. (Chronicle, 15 Feb)

TEACHERS TORTURED: Nine Zimbabwe teachers' union leaders were on Tuesday hospitalised after they were severely assaulted and tortured by militant supporters of President Robert Mugabe's ruling ZANU PF party. The ZANU PF supporters abducted Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) secretary general Raymond Majongwe and his colleagues as they distributed flyers on the streets of Harare denouncing the collapsed state of education and urging teachers not to report for duty until their salaries are reviewed. (Zim Online, 20 Feb)

TORTURED TEACHERS CHARGED: The seven Progressive Teachers’ Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) leadership who were yesterday morning abducted by the ruling ZANU PF hooligans before their subsequent torture at the party’s Provincial offices are under police guard at a private hospital in Harare. They are joined by two more members who were arrested the same day in the afternoon for distributing fliers in the Central Business District (CBD). The police were equally quick to accept ZANU PF as the complainant to the case, ignoring the overwhelming evidence that the ruling party thugs had tortured the nine. However, the police are alleging that the teachers were distributing MDC materials in the ZANU PF property, provoking the party youth militia to beat them up. (SWRadio, 20 Feb)

TORTURED TEACHERS UPDATE: A Zimbabwe teacher’s union on Thursday said ZANU PF militants sexually assaulted and abused two women who were among a group of nine union activists kidnapped and tortured by the ruling party supporters earlier this week. The Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ) secretary general Raymond Majongwe, who was among the abductees, said “We were indiscriminately beaten by seven groups of about 15 people from 1050 to 1230 using iron bars, logs, booted feet, bottles and anything that they could lay their hands on,” Majongwe said at a press briefing in Harare. “Some female members who were abducted with us were kicked on their private parts,” said Majongwe, who showed reporters his back that was pitch-black from the severe beatings. (Zim Online 21 Feb)

WEAPONS BAN: Police in Zimbabwe have banned the carrying or possession of dangerous weapons in public for the next two months as part of measures to ensure violence-free elections, the state-controlled Herald reported today. The ban would apply to all police districts in Harare and Masvingo and would remain in force until at least three weeks after the March 29 elections. The prohibition, effective from Thursday, is in accordance with Section 14 of the Public Order and Security Act Chapter 11:07, which empowers regulating authorities to ban certain weapons for security reasons, the newspaper reported. Some of the weapons prohibited include machetes, spears, daggers, axes, knobkerries, swords, knives, catapults and any other traditional weapons. “Police are empowered to search people and vehicles, confiscate and charge anyone found in possession of the specified dangerous weapons.” (The Times, SA, 20 Feb)

TRAVEL WARNING: The United States embassy in Harare warned its citizens on Wednesday against travelling to Zimbabwe, citing "safety and security concerns" over upcoming general elections in the southern African country. "The national election season in Zimbabwe may pose a security threat to US citizens in Zimbabwe," the embassy said in a statement. "Previous elections in 2000, 2002 and 2005 were contentious and sparked food, water and fuel shortages as well as occasional outbreaks of violence. "Given the present significantly weaker Zimbabwean economy, chronic hyperinflation and on-going shortages, the 2008 election season has the potential to generate widespread instability and violence." The travel warning expires on May 1. (IOL, 20 Feb)

ARMY BROKE: Zimbabwe's army will recruit soldiers only once per year instead of after every three or four months to cut on costs. The crisis-torn southern African country has an army of about 40 000 to 45 000 soldiers. However insiders say both the army and police have suffered unusually higher numbers of resignations and desertions in recent years. Anonymous sourced in the army said the traditional recruitment exercises after every quarter of the year were now eating away the bulk of the army's budget forcing senior commanders to revise them. (ZimOnline, 19 Feb)

ARMY REVOLT: Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's reliance on the army to keep him in power now rests on shaky ground. Two former heads of the Zimbabwean armed forces are solidly behind former finance minister Simba Makoni's rebellion against Mugabe. Interviews with highly placed Zanu-PF officials have confirmed that General Vitalis Zvinavashe and General Solomon Mujuru have been part of Makoni's plans. The sources said it had always been easy for Mugabe to rig elections, since the army ran the elections, but that this would be much more difficult against Makoni. Other senior army officers have helped to inspire Makoni's rebellion. In party circles he is supported by Zanu-PF stalwarts, including politburo member Dumiso Dabengwa, party chairperson John Nkomo and vice-president Joseph Msika. (IOL, 19 Feb).

ARMY BOUGHT?: The Zimbabwean government has increased military salaries by more than 300% in a move seen as buttressing army support in the approach to national elections. Salaries of junior officers rose to Z\$1.2 billion (US\$600) a month from Z\$400 million, irking other public employees including teachers, many of whom have been on strike since early January and who now receive some Z\$400 million dollars a month. The union representing most teachers is demanding a base wage of Z\$1.7 billion. Military sources said the pay raise looked like an effort to mollify discontent within the military ahead of the March 29 presidential, general and local elections. (VOA, 22 Feb)

THE ECONOMY

100,000% INFLATION: Zimbabwe's annual inflation rate has soared to over 100,000 per cent, according to official figures. "The year-on-year inflation rate for the month of January 2008, as measured by the all items Consumer Price Index (CPI) stood at 100,580.2 per cent, gaining 34,367.9 percentage points on the December rate of 66,212.3 per cent," the Central Statistical Office (CSO) said in a statement. "This means that prices as measured by the all items CPI increased by an average of 100,580.2 per cent between January 2007 and January 2008." Inflation of food and non-alcoholic beverages reached 105,428.0 per cent while non-food inflation was 97,885.7 per cent." (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

GDP TO FALL: "Private sector economists expect Zimbabwe's GDP to fall by 12% in 2007". This was predicted by Steve H. Hanke, a Professor of Applied Economics at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. (Africanliberty.org 20 Feb)

REAL INFLATION: the new annual figure of 100,500% is a massive 34 638 percentage point higher than its level in December, but still lags private estimates, many of which gauge inflation at **over 300 000 percent**. Official data on inflation is largely based on the prices of goods and services under price

controls. Even though official prices themselves have surged over the past month, many believe official numbers remain largely understated. (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

BREAD NOW Z\$ 5 MILLION: bakers have asked the National Incomes and Pricing Commission (NIPC) for a review of the price of bread to at least \$5 million a loaf, citing viability problems. National Bakers' Association (NBA) appealed to the NIPC last week to raise the bread price from \$3.3 million to \$5.3 million. (Zim Standard, 17 Feb)

COSTLY COMMUTERS: A commuter ride now costs Z\$ 5 million, up from Z\$ 3 million. The price of gasoline rose to Z\$70 million (US \$ 10) from Z\$40 million a litre, reflecting extreme scarcity of the commodity on formal or parallel markets. Until fairly recently, the U.S. dollar cost of a litre of fuel had remained stable at around US\$1.00. Maize meal was fetching Z\$40 million for 10 kilograms, from 15 million previously. (VOA, 17 Feb)

CASH DEMAND: Late last month, the Reserve Bank issued a new range of notes, the largest of which is the \$10 million note, hoping to end a four-month cash crisis. At the time, Gono put daily cash demand at between \$7.5 trillion and \$10 trillion, and said \$170 trillion was in circulation, "which by Zimbabwe's economic standards is way too high". However, Gono's most telling revelation was that the printing press at Fidelity Printers was running at close to capacity, and yet still struggling to sate demand for cash. (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

PRICE CRACK-DOWN RENEWED: Industrialists yesterday said some NIPC crack teams were asking manufacturers of cooking oil, cement, sugar and maize meal to furnish them with a list of retailers they supplied with products and then make a follow up on how they would have traded the commodities. (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

ZIM COAL TO SOUTH AFRICA: the severe power failure that is currently wreaking havoc in South Africa's economy has forced the country's power utility to look north to Zimbabwe for answers. Eskom is to import more than 45 million tonnes of coal from Zimbabwe per annum. Due to the electricity crisis in South Africa, Eskom is set to fork-out a whopping R11 billion (about 800 million pounds) as an emergency move that is destined to lessen the outages. According to Eskom Executive, Mr Brian Dames the 45-million tons would be enough to settle Eskom's running requirements. (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

TOBACCO DOWN DRASTICALLY: Zimbabwe's tobacco farmers are this year expected to produce just 65 million kgs of tobacco, the lowest output for years, due to flooding and water shortages. Zimbabwe, recently the second-largest exporter of tobacco, producing leaf for cigarettes such as Camel, Marlboro and Winston, will see an even lower yield than the 73 million kgs produced last year. Zimbabwe grows 20 percent of the tobacco that enhances the taste of cigarettes made by global companies such as Philip Morris and RJ Reynolds Tobacco Holdings. Export annual tobacco income was US\$600 million eight years ago, but last year the country earned only US\$170 million. (Zimbabwean, 22 Feb)

GONO'S NARROW ESCAPE: Zimbabwe's central bank governor has sensationally claimed that political rivals within the ruling Zanu PF party hatched a plan to have him arrested during his vacation in December on allegations he helped a private firm siphon \$21 trillion from the national fiscus. Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe governor Gideon Gono said he had been vindicated by a court ruling last week which absolved the central bank of any impropriety in releasing \$21 trillion to a local company which had promised to exchange it for scarce foreign currency. (New Zimbabwe, 18 Feb)

THE TWENTY-MILLION-DOLLAR DOLLAR: The Zimbabwe dollar took a dramatic plunge this week, falling by more than a 100 percent as the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (RBZ) returned to the parallel market to raise money to pay exporters and for critical imports, central bank sources said. Foreign currency dealers said the Zimbabwe dollar was trading around \$16 million to the United

States dollar on an illegal but flourishing parallel or black market for hard cash yesterday afternoon and as much as \$20 million for larger amounts, nose-diving from \$8.5 million on Monday this week. Dealers said the central bank had entered the market this week to source foreign currency for electricity, food and fuel for March 29 elections and to repay exporters after raiding some accounts last month. (Zim Ind, 22 Feb)

DAILY LIFE

NO SUGAR: A serious shortage of sugar is looming after the country's producers were last week forced to halt production due to crippling shortages of sugarcane and coal. Industry sources told The Financial Gazette that Hippo Valley and Zimbabwe Sugar Refineries (ZSR), the country's major producers of sugar, had exhausted their supplies of sugarcane and were now waiting for fresh supplies from the next harvest, which would be after April. (Fingaz, 21 Feb)

NO "PEOPLE'S SHOPS": A shortage of financial resources could delay the ambitious plan by the government to construct a network of 'people's shops', which will offer basic goods at hugely subsidised prices. Industry and International Trade Minister Obert Mpofu last month revealed that President Robert Mugabe's cabinet had approved plans by the Zimbabwe Development Corporation (ZDC), to open low price shops in an attempt to help hard hit citizens access basic commodities, which are currently priced beyond their reach due to rampaging inflation. Mpofu gave the new board forty days from the end of January to set up the shops. But Jonathan Kadzura, the chairman of the ZDC board of directors, told The Financial Gazette that the state-run firm was still waiting for funding to begin construction of the shops. (Zim Ind, 22 Feb)

NO SURGERY: Parirenyatwa Hospital has stopped all surgical operations after it ran out of theatre supplies last week, The Standard has confirmed. All urgent surgery is now being referred to Harare Hospital, an equally ill-equipped referral health centre. Two weeks ago, surgeons and anaesthetists stopped all operations in protest against poor working conditions. The source said apart from the problems at the theatre, shortages of drugs (including general painkillers and antibiotics) have worsened to such an extent that doctors are finding it difficult to monitor their patients. (Zim Standard, 17 Feb)

NO FUEL: Push carts now ferry the sick to hospitals in Bulawayo after fuel shortages virtually grounded the city's ambulance service. The local authority is also contemplating putting the Civil Protection Unit (CPU) on alert as its capacity to react to disasters, such as outbreaks of fire or fatal road accidents has been severely crippled. The crisis has been spawned by critical fuel shortages blamed on the National Oil Company of Zimbabwe (Noczim)'s failure to provide council with fuel over a month ago. In December, the ambulances were only fuelled twice, the council said. Last week, the executive mayor Japhet Ndabeni-Ncube sent an SOS to residents and the business community for fuel donations. He said services such as refuse collection, ambulance and fire were almost at a standstill due to the crisis. (Zim Standard, 17 Feb)

NO FOOD: The World Food Program has scaled up its operations in troubled Zimbabwe amid a deepening food crisis that threatens 4 million people with hunger and starvation, the UN aid agency says. "In view of the worsening food shortages, we have since increased the number of beneficiaries from 2.5 million in December to about 3 million people this month," said Richard Lee, the WFP regional spokesperson for southern Africa. Aid agencies say 4 million people are in need of aid assistance in Zimbabwe. But Lee says the number will subside around June as a bumper harvest is widely anticipated. (kubatana.net, 14 Feb)

NO FOOD: scores of villagers are spending up to three weeks queuing for maize-meal in Lupane, because the miller contracted by the Grain Marketing Board (GMB) is struggling to meet spiralling demand amid worsening food shortages. Several parts of Matabeleland have been facing a severe shortage of maize-meal since November last year, with the GMB citing transport problems. But

government officials and aid agencies warned last week the situation had worsened dramatically following heavy rains that rendered most parts of the province inaccessible. The most affected areas are Binga, some parts of Hwange and Tsholotsho, hit by floods towards the end of January. Binga district administrator, Christopher Mutale, said a number of areas had not received maize for the two months because bridges had been washed away.

CHOLERA CONTROLLED: A cholera outbreak in Mashonaland East and Central provinces that claimed at least 11 lives is now under control, the state-controlled Herald reported on Tuesday. The Minister of Health and Child Welfare Dr David Parirenyatwa said the epidemic task force committee was on the lookout for any suspected cholera cases in Nyamukuyo Village in Mudzi. "We are no longer receiving overwhelming reports on cholera from Mudzi. The outbreak is under control," he told the Herald. (IOL, 19 Feb)

REFUGEES DIE WHILE BEING DEPORTED: Zimbabwe's government on Tuesday said it would ask for a full investigation into the cause of an accident that killed five Zimbabweans who were being deported from South Africa. The accident occurred last Saturday when a police truck ferrying about 50 illegal immigrants rounded up from South African streets and farms to Zimbabwe collided with a bakkie near the town of Musina, just before the border. Four people were killed on the spot and one more person died later, while several more people were injured in the accident that once again cast the spotlight on the controversial way South African authorities treat illegal immigrants from Zimbabwe. (Zim Online, 20 Feb)

REFUGEE PLAN: SA is preparing a better contingency plan to handle the potential increase in the number of Zimbabwean refugees when elections are held next month. Tara Polzer, of the Forced Migration Project at the University of the Witwatersrand, said a plan was being prepared by the government with assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (Business Day, SA, 19 Feb)

TEACHER EXODUS: At least 8 000 Zimbabwean teachers quit their jobs since the beginning of the year, with many believed to have left the crisis-torn country to look for better paying jobs abroad, a teachers' union said on Wednesday. The Progressive Teachers' Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ), which regularly monitors the number of teachers leaving the country and last year said 25 000 teachers had quit the profession, said more teachers were expected to leave this year because of poor pay and working conditions. "According to our survey, about 8 000 teachers have not reported for duty since the start of the new term last month and indications are that we will lose more teachers this year because of poor salaries," PTUZ president Takavafira Zhou told ZimOnline. (Zim Online, 21 Feb)

EXODUS AT ZESA: Zesa Holdings has been hit by a major staff exodus in the past 18 months with the majority of top management and skilled labour force leaving for regional power utilities. Senior executives have joined power companies in the United Kingdom and Australia. Zesa is now understaffed in key areas like distribution and transmission. Experts said this is why the utility is taking so long to respond to the national power outages. Zesa's two control centres in Harare and Bulawayo are also understaffed. The remaining artisans have to make do with dilapidated equipment and a strained budget. It is understood that 25 of the 28 executive level managers to emerge from Zesa's unbundling exercise have left the utility since June 2006. Another 227 members of a senior management staff complement of 312 have taken up other positions outside the utility. (Zim Ind, 22 Feb)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY ROBERT MUGABE

HAPPY BIRTHDAY: The EU has renewed its sanctions targeted against the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe. Under the sanctions, which have been extended until 19th February 2009, key figures in the regime are prevented from travelling to Europe and are subject to an asset-freeze. Geoffrey Van

Orden MEP, who has spearheaded the attack on the Mugabe regime in the European Parliament, commented: "I am reassured by the renewal of these sanctions. Mugabe will be 84 on Thursday and this is exactly the birthday present he deserves. (conservativeeurope.com, 20 Feb)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY: The supermarket shelves are empty, inflation has topped 67,000 per cent and power cuts are a daily event – but Zimbabwe is about to have a party. Robert Mugabe turns 84 tomorrow and no amount of suffering is going to stop him spending a small fortune in precious currency on a lavish celebration. While the party is going on, the nightly exodus of Zimbabweans across the Limpopo River into South Africa will undoubtedly continue. (UK Independent, 20 Feb)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY: This week the Central Statistical Office released figures that showed that annual inflation is now officially over 100,000%. On Thursday, Robert Mugabe's 84th birthday, state radio announced that the fundraising committee for his celebratory bash had raised over Z\$3 trillion. While most Zimbabweans cannot afford to pay for transport to go to work, the man responsible for this economic disaster will be feted at a lavish affair in Beitbridge on Saturday. (SWRadio, 22 Feb)

NOT JOINING THE PARTY: Simba Makoni yesterday criticised President Robert Mugabe's \$3 trillion birthday bash held in Beitbridge yesterday, describing it as "an alien concept". Makoni said he was against the creation of personality cults, shortly after chairing a top-level meeting of his management committee in Harare. "I am not a cultist," he said. "If I am going to celebrate my birthday, I have to go to my family, my home. We don't have to coerce the whole nation to celebrate an individual's birthday." (Zim Std, 24 Feb)

NOT JOINING THE PARTY: Mugabe was snubbed at his party by a number of his lieutenants, all linked to Makoni, including politburo members Solomon Mujuru and Dumiso Dabengwa. Mugabe said the defections threatened to rock Zanu PF to its foundations. A number of senior party leaders from the region were conspicuous by their absence at the communist-style event whose organisers claimed they spent \$3 trillion on food and drinks. "Are we still the party that went to the war being supported by the masses and by the communities . . . when it was just us?" Mugabe asked the sizeable crowd of mostly school children. "Are we still together?" (Zim Std, 24 Feb)

PROTESTING THE PARTY: Over 1200 Zimbabwean protesters based in South Africa swamped the Beitbridge border post Saturday to demonstrate against Robert Mugabe's birthday celebrations on the other side of the border. Owing to massive food shortages in the country Mugabe is said to have chosen Beitbridge as the ideal location in order to facilitate the easy purchase and transport of food from neighbouring Musina in South Africa. Various exile groups however came together and organized a protest to counter this birthday bash. (SWRadio, 24 Feb)