Human Rights Abuses in Zimbabwe: Africans Must Respond

17 September 2003

Many African countries share some of Zimbabwe’s problems. African leaders know its crisis is complex and that factors relating to HIV/AIDS, global economics and the colonial past are among the contributors. They might well ask why the international focus on President Robert Mugabe—a man with a record of struggle against white settler rule and of defending black Zimbabweans’ rights, including their right to land. They have reason to believe some critics sympathized most with the white farmers of Zimbabwe, the targets of his “land reform” programme, and are conscious of the painful reality that in terms of global media attention, the loss of one white life is more significant that that of hundreds of Africans.

It is important to ask questions, but not to be distracted by them. And it is entirely wrong to imagine that the policies of the current Zanu PF regime offer any hope for Zimbabwe’s citizens, let alone an example to others. Regrettably some have hesitated to acknowledge this. By representing its brutal campaign against the political opposition in Zimbabwe as a black liberation struggle against neo-colonialism, the Government of Zimbabwe has counted on African support. Only with firm condemnation can African leaders avoid being tacitly implicated in its crimes.

Desperate to cling to power, as the economy began to decline at the end of the 1990s, the Zanu PF leadership openly abandoned the interests of the people of Zimbabwe and set about engineering survival through the cultivation of fear and prejudice. They now explicitly base their politics on racist arguments, while they implement a series of disastrous social and political measures intended to centralise power.

Zimbabwe’s independent media and human rights groups have worked consistently and energetically to reveal the impact of Zanu PF policies on ordinary Zimbabweans. The latest example of courage and commitment came from the Solidarity Peace Trust, a group of Southern African Church leaders, which published a report detailing the content of the National Youth Service Training programme established by Zanu PF in 2000. It is by no means the first report on this issue, but it makes devastating reading. For anyone willing to recognize them, there are parallels here with Rwanda’s interahamwe militia who played a key role in the 1994 genocide. Through the youth service, the Government of Zimbabwe is training a militia to terrorise communities under the guise of “community service” and “patriotism.” The pattern of indoctrination, manipulation and abuse is sadly all too familiar.

The victims of human rights abuses in Zimbabwe are predominantly black, of course. But Zimbabwean whites have often had educational and economic advantages enabling them to become active members of civil society. It is appropriate that they should do their share to defend the rights of all Zimbabweans and some are doing so with courage. From the point of view of the government, however, any white involvement in human rights reporting has been another opportunity to invent conspiracy theories and so evade their responsibilities.

Though it has been relatively expedient for Zanu PF to dismiss white Zimbabwean activists, it is much less easy to discredit a popular newspaper, read by ordinary people and edited and staffed by blacks. The Zimbabwe Daily News has been a thorn in the side of government since it first went to print in 1999. Its value to freedom and democracy in Zimbabwe is priceless. The recent closure of this paper is the latest in a series of attempts to silence ordinary Zimbabweans. It should not be tolerated.

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History tells us that genuine solutions to political crises require dialogue and negotiation—so those African leaders working to bring the parties together in Zimbabwe would appear to be on the right track. But after three years of state sponsored political violence, the prospects of finding common ground between Zanu PF and its opponents diminish daily. Yes, they must pursue workable solutions,
but they must also identify the source of the problems and speak frankly against the politics of repression.

The standard response from Zanu PF to individual African critics is to label them “puppets of the whites.” In September 2001, African Rights wrote to the leaders of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) protesting about the terror unleashed in Zimbabwe by the government and encouraging them to intervene. A week later, the government-owned newspaper, the Zimbabwe Herald, printed a statement from the Information Minister, Jonathan Moyo. In a lengthy rejection, the Minister accused African Rights’ director, Rakiya Omaar, of being a “sell out African”; “a house nigger”; “partisan”; and of being associated with “racist networks of former Rhodesians running the MDC’s anti-Zimbabwean propaganda drive.”

In the years since that letter, the lives of ordinary people in Zimbabwe have become much more difficult—violence and poverty have increased. Meanwhile the leaders tasked with developing African responses to the crisis in Zimbabwe are failing to grasp the nettle. Until there is a concerted African initiative to hold the Zanu PF government to account, we would indeed be “selling out” to remain silent about the suffering of ordinary Zimbabweans.

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