



SADC MEDIATION EFFORT HAS LITTLE IMPACT

Analysts dismiss the South African president's claim of significant progress in negotiations to break Zimbabwe's political deadlock.

By Norman Chitapi in Harare

When leaders of the Southern African Development Community, SADC, met in the Zambian capital Lusaka to discuss the situation in Zimbabwe on August 16-17, they lived up to their reputation for dealing with President Robert Mugabe with kid gloves.

Analysts said while they had not expected SADC heads of state to abandon South African president Thabo Mbeki's trademark policy of quiet diplomacy on Zimbabwe, they had at the very least hoped for some tough talk about the deteriorating economic situation there.

In March, SADC leaders tasked Mbeki with leading a process of mediation to achieve a political accommodation



Credit: Lazele

State-run daily The Herald runs story claiming SADC support for Zimbabwe. Picture taken August 28.

between the ruling ZANU-PF party and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, to resolve the country's eight-year political and economic crisis.

In the negotiations, the MDC is demanding a new constitution, electoral law reforms and the right to vote for all Zimbabweans in the

diaspora, as well as an end to political violence and repression before joint presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for next year.

President Mbeki insisted at the onset of his mediation effort that he did not want media publicity to derail the talks or set their agenda.

NEWS IN BRIEF

- United States food giant Heinz has sold its 49 per cent stake in Zimbabwe's cooking oil producer Olivine Industries to a government-owned cotton company, Cottco. Reports that the deal is part of the government's plan to take over foreign-owned businesses were denied.
- A Harare magistrate has acquitted journalist Gift Phiri of charges of working without accreditation from the government. Delivering the judgement, magistrate

Stanley Chimedza said the state had failed to define the offence clearly enough.

- Veterans of the 1970s liberation war say they want main opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai barred from contesting next year's presidential election because of reports he has called for sanctions against Zimbabwe.
- Australia has deported eight students whose parents belong to Zimbabwe's ruling elite in protest

against the autocratic rule of President Robert Mugabe. Australian prime minister John Howard has described Mugabe as an "undemocratic bully".

- The Grain Marketing Board depot in Bulawayo has only 184 tonnes of maize in stock in a city where residents usually consume around 8,000 tonnes of the cereal a month. Meanwhile, the meat shortage facing the city is likely to drag on as cattle ranchers refuse to sell their stock at low prices.

Although Mbeki reported significant “progress” in his presentation to the SADC summit in Zambia, analysts say there has been little change.

In March, SADC leaders also mandated its executive secretary Tomaz Salomao to study the state of the Zimbabwean economy and recommend possible solutions.

“Mbeki has succeeded in convincing everyone that his quiet diplomacy is the way to go” — western diplomat.

At the Lusaka meeting, Salomao reported that the economic crisis in Zimbabwe was a product of western sanctions rather than President Mugabe's policies. These have included a controversial land reform programme in 2000, in which farms were seized from white farmers and given to poor black farmers as well as to the president's cronies and party supporters.

A western diplomat in the capital Harare said “these two gentlemen [Mbeki and Salomao] have been a big let-down”.

“Mbeki has succeeded in convincing everyone that his quiet diplomacy is the way to go, although nothing tangible has come out of it over the years. People at least expected some limited variation to the usual solidarity message and back-patting that African leaders have become infamous for,” he said.

The diplomat said that instead of encouraging Mugabe to reform, the SADC summit has provided him with no incentive to abandon his policies. Blaming western sanctions for Zimbabwe's economic crisis lets him off the hook, as he can claim he is a victim of foreign machinations.

He said that Salomao should have left politics to the politicians, but that

“instead, he is repeating the government mantra that foreign sanctions are to blame for Zimbabwe's parlous state”.

“This is deplorable and regrettable. We need some straight talking if political leaders are to change their ways. If everyone begins to sing their propaganda tune, then we are lost,” he said. “Now Mugabe can go to his regional colleagues and tell them, ‘This is what we have been telling you. America and Britain are punishing us for taking our land’.”

A senior official in the MDC said that while the party was keen to participate in the Mbeki talks, the whole process was fast losing credibility.

“We are engaged in a process in which we are unable to influence the course of events,” said the official, who refused to be named. “Some of our key demands like a new constitution are dismissed outright, yet we are expected to keep negotiating. We really don't know what President Mbeki means by progress, because so far there haven't been talks to talk about.”

“We are engaged in a process in which we are unable to influence the course of events” — senior MDC official.

The MDC official said SADC leaders still clearly favoured President Mugabe and ZANU-PF. The region is largely ruled by first-generation liberation movements suspicious of new actors in the political arena, which they often accuse of acting as fronts for western interests, he said.

“Although they talk in hushed tones about the need for change in Zimbabwe, none of them openly expresses solidarity with those fighting for that change,” he said. “It is as if

those opposed to Mugabe are engaged in illegal activities.”

Andrew Kudakwashe, an analyst and historian who has been following the mediation process, said SADC leaders appeared more comfortable with the prospect of a reformed ZANU-PF without Mugabe than with a complete change of party — which could have a “domino effect” in the region.

SADC “would rather have gradual change fostered from within the ruling party” — analyst Andrew Kudakwashe.

“Nobody among the SADC leaders was comfortable with the sudden change which took place in Zambia when Kenneth Kaunda was humiliated by a little known trade union leader called [Frederick] Chiluba in 1991,” he said.

“They would rather have gradual change fostered from within the ruling party. It is a process they feel they can control and manipulate, rather than a radical transformation of the political status quo.”

But another diplomat said it was not all smooth sailing ahead for the government in Zimbabwe. While condemning Salomao's “hopeless” diagnosis of the causes of the Zimbabwe crisis, he said that SADC's proposed rescue package would come with tough conditions.

He noted that none of the reports by Mbeki and Salomao had been formerly adopted at the summit because there was no consensus on what needed to be done, or on the true cause of the crisis.

“Salomao probably reported what he presumed the leaders wanted to hear,” he said, “but there were clear calls for political change in Zimbabwe, and aid

won't come cheap. That message must have been made clear to Mugabe and his ministers, despite attempts to save face."

President Mugabe told reporters back home that the summit in Zambia had gone well and that his government would proceed with its economic strategies. Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa, who is leading the government team in the talks, was dismissive of the dialogue, saying there was nothing to negotiate with the MDC.

"What does Mugabe mean when he says 'we will continue in accordance with our own programmes to turn around the economy', when the economy has been on a rollercoaster for almost ten years?" the diplomat asked.

Analysts suggest that ZANU-PF can afford to be dismissive of the talks, as divisions which have weakened the MDC since it split in 2005 over participation in senate elections means it poses less of a threat.

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"People like Thabo Mbeki who have been reluctant to criticise Mugabe don't want to be seen to be pushing opposition politics. The MDC must demonstrate that it has an agenda of its own which SADC leaders can support without being accused of pushing regime-change politics."

Norman Chitapi is the pseudonym of a reporter in Zimbabwe. ■

MUGABE COULD BENEFIT FROM DIASPORA VOTE



Credit: Lazele

Mugabe voting in the 2005 election.

The MDC may regret pressing for exiles to participate in next year's election.

By Joseph Sithole in Harare

Zimbabwean ruling party ZANU-PF may benefit if it gives into opposition demands to allow the country's sizeable diaspora to vote in next year's elections, warn analysts.

The right for all Zimbabweans in the diaspora to vote in the joint parliamentary and presidential elections is among key demands put forward by Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, in ongoing talks with ZANU-PF.

The government has so far opposed extending the vote to an estimated 3.5 million Zimbabweans living abroad, arguing that it would give the MDC an unfair advantage as ZANU-PF senior officials cannot campaign in Europe or the United States following travel restrictions imposed on them in 2002 after a disputed election.

But analysts warn it could be to the authorities' advantage to give ex-pats the vote, as the difficulties of verifying the identity of Zimbabweans scattered around the world would create the potential for vote-rigging.

Few émigrés will want to return before they know the results of next year's elections.

The Zimbabwean diaspora includes people of all social classes and political persuasions who have fled the country in the past seven years of political and economic turmoil which has come about as a result of President Robert Mugabe's ruinous policies.

Millions of Zimbabweans in neighbouring South Africa have now formed lobby groups under the banner of the MDC, demanding the right to

vote in the crucial parliamentary and presidential 2008 elections.

But few are prepared to return into the country before they know the outcome of the ballot, which is widely expected to be won by the ruling party using whatever means are at its disposal.

ZANU-PF could benefit from diaspora vote by rigging the numbers.

Mugabe, who has put himself forward as the sole candidate for ZANU-PF in the elections, is still to be endorsed by the party, but groups that support him such as the Women's and Youth Leagues have already vowed to support his nomination.

The MDC says that most Zimbabweans who have left the country in recent years have fled Mugabe's repressive policies and the precipitous economic collapse. This, it argues, would make them predisposed to vote for Mugabe's opponent.

"They are angry with Mugabe whose incompetent and illegitimate government has ruined their lives," said an MDC official in the capital of Harare. "Mugabe is afraid that once such people are allowed to vote, he has no chance of staying a day longer in power. He will therefore resist this demand with his life."

But analysts caution that MDC's demand may hand ZANU-PF victory on a silver platter.

In the past, ZANU-PF has been criticised for allowing military personnel on international duty and embassy staff around the globe to vote, in a process which the opposition said lacked transparency.

Without any means of immediately verifying the residential addresses and authenticating the names of ordinary Zimbabweans registering and voting from different locations across the globe, analysts say extending the vote to the diaspora could be manna for the ruling party's rigging machine.

"The real irony is that it is in fact ZANU-PF and the government who are resisting pressure to allow people in the diaspora to vote," said a political analyst at the University of Zimbabwe. "But very soon, they may discover it might, in fact, be to its advantage."

The analyst explained that so-called ghost voters are normally eliminated by voting requirements, such as national IDs, proof of residence and citizenship. "But if the MDC's claims of vote-rigging by ZANU-PF over the years are to be taken seriously, it means even this rigorous screening process is not foolproof. What then would stop them taking advantage of voters whose addresses we don't know?" he asked.

MDC would be the "biggest loser" if the government awards voting rights to diaspora at the last moment — Harare-based analyst.

"The MDC would have to act with great circumspection in trying to leverage the diaspora vote. They may live to regret ever raising the point in the first place."

Another Harare-based analyst said there was a danger that ZANU-PF "might make a show of resisting this plum offer and then strike when the enemy least expects. They can decide at the last minute to 'make a huge concession' for Zimbabweans in the diaspora to vote after they have

played with the numbers — and the MDC will be the biggest loser."

The analyst said a low turnout in the recently-ended nationwide voter registration exercise may prompt the government to exploit the situation in order to gain more votes.

The registration process ended on August 17. Only an estimated 80,000 people, or about four average urban constituencies, were added to the voters' roll, bringing the total number of registered voters countrywide to about 5.5 million.

"If the diaspora vote can be counted on to boost numbers and give the winner the appearance of legitimacy, ZANU-PF will grab the chance" — analyst.

There are also concerns that voter numbers will be low as a significant number of those on the voters' roll have since left the country for various reasons, including further education and better employment opportunities.

"There is a longstanding dispute over legitimacy which has caused Zimbabwe's isolation from the international community. That in part is also responsible for the country's relentless economic slide," said the analyst.

"If the diaspora vote can be counted on to boost numbers and give the [election] winner the appearance of legitimacy, ZANU-PF will grab the chance. In fact, ZANU-PF appears more adept at changing and adapting to changing circumstances than the MDC."

Joseph Sithole is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

BULAWAYO FACES WATER CRISIS

Government refuses to intervene to tackle acute shortages in opposition stronghold.

By Mike Nyoni in Harare

The government is refusing to tackle increasing water shortages and instances of waterborne diseases in Bulawayo because of a struggle over control of the city's water supply.

Unless local officials hand over control of the water supply to a government agency, the central authorities have said they will not help residents in Zimbabwe's second largest city, where waterborne diseases are on the increase and most of the water supply has now dried up.

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Resistance to a takeover by the government agency is fuelled by reports that it has failed to tackle the water crisis in Harare and other cities.

The government has warned that it will not address water shortages in Bulawayo unless local officials hand over control to the official agency.

Water shortages and contaminated water supplies are the latest in a long line of daily hardships to face people all over the country.

In Harare, residents of the poorer suburbs of Mabvuku, Tafara and Glen View sometimes go without tapwater



Credit: Lazele

Residents of a high-density suburb in Harare queue for water after a two-week cut in the mains supply. Picture taken June 30.

for up to four weeks at a time. Even the wealthy are beginning to suffer, with the water supply in the upmarket suburb of Glen Lorne drying up two weeks ago.

Water shortages in Harare have led to doctors treating 900 cases of diarrhoea a day, according to a report by the state-run Herald newspaper on August 20. "We have a persistent problem and have decided to continue treating all diarrhoea-related cases free of charge," said Harare health director Prosper Chonzi in the report.

Even where there is access to water, it is often unfit for human consumption.

The Bulawayo authorities have resorted to stringent water rationing, allowing residents to access water for only a few hours every three days.

Situated in the heart of Matabeleland 450 kilometres west of Harare, Bulawayo has always been an opposition city, voting against the ruling ZANU-PF in every election since independence in 1980.

The city has for years battled with water shortages, due to drought and a rapidly increasing population.

The ambitious Matabeleland Zambezi Water Project has remained a pipe-dream for political reasons.

The ambitious and expensive Matabeleland Zambezi Water Project — which plans to pipe water from the Zambezi river 450 kilometres away to Matabeleland — has remained a pipe-dream for political reasons.

Even if there was the political will to see it through, the recession-hit government lacks the resources.

Bulawayo is now facing its worst water crisis ever -compounded by the fact that the government refuses to help unless the city allows a government agency to take control of the supply and distribution of water.

In Harare, Gweru and Mutare, the Zimbabwe National Water Authority, ZINWA, took control of the supply and distribution of water after President Robert Mugabe's regime fired elected opposition mayors and councillors and appointed its own favoured commissioners.

But Bulawayo city council has resisted a ZINWA takeover bid.

The city's mayor Japhet Ndabeni-Ncube has accused the government of trying to destroy the city.

Without water, people are unable to wash their hands or flush their toilets, increasing the risk of disease outbreaks. Most people answer nature's call in the bush or in open public spaces at night.

While the effects of the water crisis may be similar in Bulawayo and Harare, analysts say the causes are different.

"Harare is very different from Bulawayo — our water problems are man-made" — Harare city council worker.

Water shortages in Bulawayo are exacerbated by drought and the standoff over control of supplies, whereas those in Harare are the result of mismanagement, inefficiency and lack of planning as the city's population continues to expand rapidly.

"Harare is very different from Bulawayo," said a Harare council

employee who requested anonymity.

"Our water problems here are man-made. The shortages are mainly a result of old pipes which keep bursting. A lot of expensively treated water is wasted through leakages."

He said any deaths which occur as a result of water-related illnesses could be blamed on poor management of the city's affairs.

Since ZINWA took over water management in the capital nearly a year ago, supplies have worsened. This has fuelled resistance by Bulawayo residents, who say they have no faith in ZINWA given its record in Harare and other cities.

Mike Nyoni is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

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