Denying entry to delegation said to have scuppered chance of securing aid.

By Jabu Shoko in Harare

By banning the visit of three high-profile international figures, President Robert Mugabe has thwarted an opportunity to convince international relief agencies to send aid to the beleaguered country, said Zimbabwe’s non-governmental organisations.

On November 21, Mugabe refused permission to three members of the international organisation the Elders — former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan, ex-United States president Jimmy Carter and international advocate for women’s and children’s rights Graca Machel.

The delegation had planned to visit Zimbabwe to assess the impact of the humanitarian crisis unravelling there, where more than half the population is starving and the number of deaths from a cholera outbreak is approaching 300.

“We seek no permission other than permission to help the poor and the desperate. However, the refusal of the Zimbabwean government to facilitate our visit in any way has made it impossible for us to travel at this time,” Annan told reporters in Johannesburg, South Africa, on November 21.

A child is left unattended while the mother pans for gold in a river in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe — October 25 2008

The refusal of the Zimbabwean government to facilitate our visit in any way has made it impossible for us to travel at this time — former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan

The Secretary-General also expressed alarm that the humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe “is now desperate and will worsen in the coming months”. He spoke out following the decision of President Robert Mugabe not to allow a delegation from international organisation The Elders into the country to assess the problems faced by Zimbabweans.

The Secretary-General’s statement said he supported the group’s humanitarian initiative and hoped “that another mission can take place in the near future, given the rapidly deteriorating situation in the country”.}

Meanwhile, UK paper The Independent reported on November 26 that more than 3,000 people in Zimbabwe have died from cholera in the past two weeks — 10 times more than the widely-cited figure of just over 300. “But even this higher figure is still an understatement because very few bother to register the deaths of their relatives these days,” said a senior official from the health ministry, who was quoted in the piece.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called on Zimbabwe’s politicians to come to a power-sharing deal to allow them to confront the problems facing the country which is in the midst of a severe humanitarian and health crisis.

“The people of Zimbabwe cannot afford another failure by their political leadership to reach a fair and workable agreement that would allow Zimbabwe to tackle the formidable challenges ahead,” he said in a statement released on November 25.
While the president’s representatives stated that the three were advised to postpone their trip, government insiders say they were denied entry because they are viewed as hostile to ZANU-PF, and suspected of pursuing an opposition agenda.

Fambai Ngirande, a spokesman for umbrella organisation the National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations, told IWPR the visit was a perfect opportunity to highlight Zimbabweans’ need of food and other essential drugs.

Ngirande, whose organisation sent dossiers to the trio chronicling the humanitarian crisis in the country, said Zimbabwe urgently needed international aid to counter overwhelming levels of destitution there.

The actions of the Zimbabwean government do not help anyone at all as they portray the country as an unfavourable donor destination — Fambai Ngirande, spokesman for the National Association of Non-Governmental Organisations

Annan, Carter and Machel were in a position to launch a campaign for the country, which, he said, is becoming increasingly isolated by the international donor community because of its leaders’ intransigence.

However, a chance to secure this vital support has been lost “due to the government’s selfish political interests”, he said.

“The actions of the Zimbabwean government [in preventing the visit] do not help anyone at all as they portray the country as an unfavourable donor destination.”

Ngirande pointed out that the daily struggle for survival for the ordinary Zimbabwean has become unbearable.

“The lives of millions are under threat as they face serious food and water shortages and a breakdown in the health service, as evidenced by the closure of hospitals,” he said.

These problems have been compounded by an outbreak of cholera this summer which has so far left 281 people dead.

According to the World Food Programme, some 5.1 million Zimbabweans will be in urgent need of aid by early next year.

There are also fears that the country faces a grim harvest because the government is ill prepared for the current planting season, and there is a crippling shortage of fertiliser, seed and spare parts.

The ban on the visit exposes the heartlessness of the ZANU-PF leadership, which does not have the interests of the ordinary people at heart — Useni Sibanda, coordinator of the Christian Alliance of Zimbabwe

Useni Sibanda, coordinator of the Christian Alliance of Zimbabwe, agreed that the banned visit meant an opportunity had been lost to garner support for the country.

The delegation would, among other things, has highlighted the plight of Zimbabweans who, in addition to suffering starvation, are dying of curable diseases like cholera, he maintained.

 “[The ban on the visit] exposes the heartlessness of the ZANU-PF leadership, which does not have the interests of the ordinary people at heart,” said Sibanda.

According to Sibanda, refusing the Elders entry into the country has also done longer-term damage. “This diplomatic blunder will have a negative impact in that it sends a signal to donors that Zimbabwe does not need international assistance. It would appear the government is in denial.”

He said he thought the government wanted to perpetuate the myth that all is well in the country.

“If they don’t have anything to hide, why not allow the delegation in to see the hunger stalking both urban and rural dwellers?” he asked.

The Elders have remained in South Africa to brief themselves as fully as possible about the situation in its neighbouring country.

There they will meet with representatives of humanitarian agencies, civil society organisations, business people and officials from across the region.

Jabu Shoko is the pseudonym of an IWPR-trained journalist in Zimbabwe.
INTERNATIONAL BID TO HIGHLIGHT SUFFERING

Delegation of prominent dignitaries hopes to focus spotlight on plight of a nation suffering growing poverty, famine and disease.

By Jabu Shoko in Harare

A team of three high-profile figures will visit Zimbabwe this weekend to assess the escalating humanitarian crisis amid claims that a recent cholera epidemic is far worse than the authorities are prepared to admit.

Former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan, ex-United States president Jimmy Carter and international advocate for women and children’s rights Graça Machel — members of a group known as The Elders — plan to visit Harare on November 22 and 23.

Zimbabwe has experienced a shortage of grain since Mugabe’s land-grab policies began in 2000, when land was taken from white farmers and given to poor black people and the president’s supporters.

The famine has since been aggravated by Mugabe’s skewed economic policies as well as by his government’s obstruction of aid distribution by international agencies, which it accuses of supporting the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

In rural areas, particularly in the south, villagers are reportedly competing with wild animals for fruits, berries and edible roots and several have reportedly died after eating poisonous roots and berries. Relief agencies estimate that more than half the country’s 12 million population are in urgent need of food aid.

A recent cholera outbreak has compounded the problem. While Mugabe’s spin doctors claim that 36 people have died of the disease since the epidemic began two months ago, the MDC and independent health experts put the figure at closer to 200.

While Mugabe’s spin doctors claim that 36 people have died of the disease since the cholera epidemic began two months ago, the MDC and independent health experts put the figure at closer to 200.

The Combined Harare Residents Association, CHRA, an umbrella body for residents’ associations in the capital, staged an anti-cholera demonstration last weekend in one of the hardest-hit suburbs, where more than 60 people have reportedly succumbed to the disease.

Annan said the mission is intended to focus the world’s attention on the crisis in the country. “Relieving the suffering of millions of people must be the priority of Zimbabwe’s leaders,” he said.

Analysts hope the visit will highlight the plight of ordinary Zimbabweans battling starvation and disease. Many say that President Robert Mugabe’s ZANU-PF party is concealing the extent of the crisis in the country, where increasing numbers are going without food, cholera is rife in many areas and a critical shortage of water is affecting even Harare.

Relieving the suffering of millions of people must be the priority of Zimbabwe’s leaders — Annan

A boy waits to be given water purification tablets at a Harare clinic — November 1 2008

Credit: Lazele
Fambai Ngirandi, a spokesperson for CHRA, told IWPR this week that his organisation has been inundated with calls from people seeking to register for food aid.

“We have a situation where people in towns, who, traditionally, do not register for food aid or social welfare, are coming forward,” said Ngirandi.

He said he hoped The Elders’ visit would help reverse the downward spiral in the country.

“As an organisation, we welcome such a visit and hope it will end the plight of the people who are on the verge of starvation,” he said.

Ernest Mudzengi, a political analyst, also welcomed the news of the delegation. “We need more of these visits so people outside the country get first-hand information,” he said.

“The public media in Zimbabwe cannot be trusted. Right now, they claim there is no humanitarian crisis, yet people are dying like flies in townships.”

Katy Cronin, spokesperson for The Elders’ delegation, said that the trio have been observing the decline in Zimbabwe’s economic and humanitarian situation with concern for some time.

During their trip, she said, they plan to assess how to respond more effectively to Zimbabwe’s humanitarian needs to prevent further deterioration of the situation and to stop it spilling over into neighbouring countries.

The visit comes as talks have stalled between Mugabe and opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai over the allocation of cabinet posts, among other contentious issues. The political impasse has delayed the implementation of a power-sharing arrangement which was mediated by former South African president Thabo Mbeki and signed on September 15.

The public media in Zimbabwe cannot be trusted. They claim there is no humanitarian crisis, yet people are dying like flies in townships — political analyst Ernest Mudzengi

Delays in forming a government are prolonging the suffering of the people — Annan

While Annan said the delegation would not become involved in the current political negotiations, he said its members urged Zimbabwe’s political leaders to move swiftly to fully implement the power-sharing deal — particularly those provisions on humanitarian and food assistance.

“We hope that our visit will also add momentum to the global response to longer-term issues of reform and development once an inclusive government is in place and operational.”

Annan said it was crucial that the international community supported Zimbabwe’s recovery.

Nelson Mandela announced the founding of The Elders on his 89th birthday in 2007. It is a group of a dozen world leaders who have convened in order to tackle the world’s problems.

Jabu Shoko is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe.
Zimbabwe said to be facing another poor grain harvest next year because of severe shortages of seed and fertiliser.

By Jabu Shoko in Harare

It rained in most parts of Zimbabwe last week, signalling the official start of the planting season in this troubled country.

Most farmers here start putting the maize seed in the ground during the first week of November to take advantage of the start of the rains. But agricultural experts told IWPR the lashing downpours, which came after a serious heat wave, would count for nothing, as the Harare government was ill-prepared for taking advantage of it.

"The country does not have foreign currency to procure fertiliser, seed, fuel, farming implements and spare parts for tractors and other farming implements — agricultural expert Renson Gasela

"The country does not have foreign currency to procure fertiliser, seed, fuel, farming implements and spare parts for tractors and other farming implements," said Renson Gasela, an agricultural expert who is also the agriculture spokesman for the small, breakaway faction of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

"If the truth be told, nothing is happening on the farms. Some of those black farmers given land by Mugabe are content with hunting the few wildlife left on the properties instead of tilling land to feed hungry Zimbabweans. The country is starting another disastrous agriculture season."

Nelson Chamisa, the spokesman for the main MDC faction headed by Morgan Tsvangirai, concurred, noting that the little fertiliser, seed and fuel that trickle in from China, Mugabe’s all-weather friend, was quickly being diverted to the farms given to big-wigs in his ZANU-PF party.

"This country needs change now if we are to avert hunger every year," said Chamisa. "The government does not have money to procure agricultural inputs. There’s also chaos in the farming sector as ZANU-PF functionaries continue invading farms instead of letting those who know the business of farming go ahead with the job."

The commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Force, General Constantine Chiwenga, assisted by senior military officials, has been tasked with identifying the beneficiaries of agricultural inputs. When the maize seed and fertiliser arrive from China, they are doled out at ZANU-PF rallies to party members and senior government officials; perceived opposition supporters go empty-handed.

The United Nations estimates between 5 and 5.5 million Zimbabweans, or nearly half the population, will need emergency food rations next year. Last year’s harvests failed because of fertiliser and fuel shortages. Currently, about 5.1 million people are reportedly receiving food handouts from local and international food relief agencies.

The respected Famine Early Warning Unit last week issued a warning that Zimbabwe would be facing another inadequate grain harvest next year because of severe shortages of seed and fertiliser.
The Washington-based Famine Early Warning Systems Network said the southern African nation had only 19 per cent of the maize seed it needed to meet its planting plans, and even if it was able to import more, the country was unlikely to be able to get it in the ground in time.

Given the critical shortages of seed and fertiliser, 2008-2009 prospects are poor unless resources can quickly be mobilised to address these shortages — spokesperson for the Famine Early Warning Systems Network

Zimbabwe was also facing a fertiliser shortage, with current stocks standing at a mere one per cent of requirements.

“Given the critical shortages of seed and fertiliser, 2008-2009 prospects are poor unless resources can quickly be mobilised to address these shortages,” said a spokesperson for the organisation, who added that “given current economic turmoil, political instability, and the necessity to direct resources to import and distribute food, improving access to inputs remains a challenge”.

The continuing ejection of white farmers from their land has not helped matters. A few weeks ago, the prime farmland of the chairman of the Commercial Farmers Union was invaded by marauding ZANU-PF militia who gave him only a few hours to vacate the farm. Elsewhere, beneficiaries of Mugabe’s land reform suspected of voting for Tsvangirai are being pushed out of properties at a time they are supposed to be readying the land for the start of the planting season.

At the same time, a substantial bailout promised by the South African government to bankroll Zimbabwe’s agricultural season — specifically the procurement of maize seed, fertiliser and farming implements — has not materialised because it is subject to the fulfilment of a precarious power-sharing agreement between Mugabe and Tsvangirai. Trevor Manuel, South Africa’s finance minister, told his country’s parliament in October that the aid package for Zimbabwe would be provided only once a government had been formed and humanitarian relief agencies were free to deliver aid.

Manuel said the money was “subject to acceptance of an appropriate role for food relief agencies by a recognised multiparty government”.

Aid agencies claim that the government is continuing to hinder their efforts to deliver food to starving Zimbabweans, some reportedly surviving by scavenging for wild fruits and edible roots.

Aid agencies claim the government is hindering their efforts to deliver food to starving Zimbabweans

The multi-party government the South Africans are waiting for does not seem likely to be formed anytime soon. Mugabe and Tsvangirai are at loggerheads over the allocation of ministries in an all-inclusive government. A full SADC summit in South Africa on November 9 failed to break the impasse. Mugabe has insisted on holding on to the entire security apparatus, while Tsvangirai has offered a compromise: ZANU-PF can take charge of the military while the MDC controls the police. Regional leaders directed that Mugabe and Tsvangirai share the interior ministry, a proposal flatly rejected by the opposition leader.

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