

Zimbabwe and the Commonwealth

- Action Speaks Louder than Words

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The “breakthrough” agreement signed by Zimbabwe on 6th September 2001, in Abuja, Nigeria amounts to little more than empty words filled with empty promises. The Abuja Agreement was the result of a two - day meeting of Commonwealth Foreign Ministers that was chaired by Nigeria. By signing the Agreement, the Government of Zimbabwe essentially committed itself to halting the land invasions by the ‘war veterans’ and to re - establishing the Rule of Law. In spite of this commitment, however, the situation in Zimbabwe remains unchanged as yet more lives have been lost in violence as a result of farm invasions, the cost of living continuing to increase and food shortages later in the year now look inevitable.

The Abuja Agreement highlights what is common knowledge to Zimbabweans, simply that the land and economic issues now tainting Zimbabwe boiled over 18 months ago when the ruling party, ZANU-PF, was defeated in its bid to bring in a new Constitution, in February 2000. This was a landmark, not only for the citizens of Zimbabwe who had finally realised that democracy could indeed work in their interests, but also for the Government in that it was the first time in almost 20 years that the electorate had rejected any of their policies and proposals. All Zimbabweans readily acknowledge the need for fair and equitable redistribution of land within the country where the bulk of the best arable land is still held by a minority of the population. It is purely the method that is being used by the Government of Zimbabwe to facilitate such reform that is unacceptable.

The issue of land is one that is inextricably linked to the history of Zimbabwe. Not only was the fertile land and agreeable climate one of the major factors that attracted European settlers in the late 19th Century, but it was also one of the primary issues that the ‘Second Chimurenga’ was fought over in the 1970’s. The outcome of this liberation struggle was Independence in 1980 and a promise by the Government to initiate an immediate programme of land reform. The hope that had filled the landless majority soon evaporated as the re - distribution process in Zimbabwe not only proved to be a slow one but also one that depended upon whether or not you were a part of the new ruling black elite. It has been fraught with corruption and nepotism and conveniently ‘brought out of the cupboard for show’ as and when ZANU - PF has needed to garner support or be re-elected by the Government.

Zimbabwean’s increasing discontent with the Government and the increasing need for change resulted in the rejection of the Draft Constitution proposed ZANU - PF that would have, amongst other things, enabled the ruling party to remain just that as well as facilitated the start of a potentially disastrous land reform programme. Zimbabweans have at last come of age and seen the Government for what it is, and what it has done to the Country. The fast - track land reform programme that the Government has embarked upon, effectively the invasion of farms and the intimidation of farm workers and owners alike, has accelerated the destruction of a country that, once upon a time, was referred to as the ‘bread - basket’ of Africa.

One must not lose sight of the other equally significant events that are taking place within the country. Zimbabwe is now in an economic and governance crisis. There is continued harassment and persecution of the independent media, and of supporters of the opposing political party alike. The collapse of the economy, lack of foreign currency and devaluation of the Zimbabwe dollar has not only resulted in default on debt repayments but also, amongst other things, fuel shortages, power cuts, a significant drop in school attendance and the use of expired drugs in hospitals.

The blatant disregard for the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, as well as the absence of accountability for the Zimbabwe Republic Police has left the majority of Zimbabweans feeling disillusioned. There seems to be little hope that things may change with the upcoming election in March 2002 either. The Government has already refused to allow a delegation of election monitors from the European Union into Zimbabwe, and it has asked the delegation from the United States to leave. During the election last year the Government refused to allow any election monitors from the United Kingdom. The Government of Zimbabwe cannot be allowed to pick and choose who it will permit to monitor the election next year.

Both the official and unofficial Commonwealth has been vocal in their condemnation of the current situation that is prevailing in Zimbabwe. In March 2001, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group sought to send a delegation on a fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe – the Government informed this proposed delegation that they would not be welcome. After months of negotiations, and on the brink of total isolation by the international community, Zimbabwe finally agreed to the meeting of the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers that took place in Abuja, Nigeria at the beginning of September 2001.

Soon after the Abuja Agreement was signed, the Southern African Development Council (SADC) announced their intention to appoint a Ministerial Taskforce to monitor Zimbabwe's commitment to stop the political violence and resolve the land crisis. However, Zimbabweans are cynical about President Mugabe's commitment to follow the rule of law, stop land invasions and end the political violence and intimidation that seem to have become a way of life.

The war veterans, who have been invading the white owned farms, have openly rejected the Abuja Agreement and reports of violence and land invasions continue. Furthermore, a visit of a number of Commonwealth Ministers to Zimbabwe was agreed as part of the Abuja Agreement. The Government of Zimbabwe has since informed the Commonwealth Secretary General that President Mugabe will actually be out of the country during the period in which the visit was proposed. The next time that he will be available will be after the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Brisbane, Australia.

At a time when the Commonwealth has been involved in a period of intense introspection, and when the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group appears to be ready to undertake a more proactive role in ensuring adherence to the Harare Principles, it is important that Zimbabwe is effectively dealt with in terms of such.

Clearly, unless Zimbabwe implements the provisions of the Abuja Agreement as well as ensuring compliance with the Harare Principles it must be suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth.