

Walking a tightrope - Zimbabwe and the Commonwealth

- Derek Ingram

Member, Trustee Committee, CHRI

A message from Zimbabwe the other week was heartrending, but one of many. It read: "Many of us are on the verge of giving up. Our lives have become almost unbearable. Our small towns seem to have been taken over completely by political warlords who have the power to take over businesses, ban newspapers, arrange for people to be beaten if they are thought to support the political opposition". The writer adds: "It is not land or race which has caused Zimbabwe's hell, just evil politics."

The situation in Zimbabwe is in danger of undermining the Commonwealth - and time is running out.

In the first week of December the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) takes place in Abuja, Nigeria. If by then nothing has been resolved in Zimbabwe, the Commonwealth will face its worst crisis since the mid-sixties when it was convulsed by events in, ironically, the same country the war caused by the white settler rebellion led by Ian Smith.

President Robert Mugabe is a clever politician. When 9/11 forced the postponement of CHOGM in Australia he awaited the new date before scheduling his presidential elections. Thus when the leaders met in Coober Pedy in March 2002, the Zimbabwe poll was just two weeks ahead and observers were on the ground. CHOGM could not decide whether to take action against Zimbabwe or wait until the elections had taken place.

The leaders decided to set up a so-called troika consisting of the past, present and future CHOGM chairpersons - Presidents Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, and Prime Minister John Howard of Australia. The three were empowered to meet immediately after the election and decide in the light of the report of the observer group report what action the Commonwealth should take.