

A STANCE ON ZIMBABWE

Statement issued on 10 October 2007, by the Diakonia Council of Churches

Background

The next EU-AU Summit is scheduled to take place in Lisbon Portugal on December 8 and 9, 2007. The debate which is in question relates to the participation at this event by Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe and the threatened boycotting of the event, by UK Premier Gordon Brown.

There appears to be a growing impasse and the actual summit itself is now threatened with cancellation. The summit has traditionally taken the shape of an interactive forum on strategic issues of mutual interest to those invited. These have included climate change, security, economic governance and migration. The last summit was held seven years ago and Mugabe's participation has been cited as the cause for its sidelining ever since. Given the context of the issues likely to be tabled at such a summit, it is notable that in May 2007 Zimbabwe was elected to lead the UN Commission on Sustainable Economic Development by a 26-21 vote, represented by the country's environment and tourism minister, Francis Nhema, himself subject to an EU travel ban. This move has been interpreted by many as a direct snub to the US and the EU by developing nations. Most vocal in their opposition to this appointment were Mr Ian Pearson, the UK Minister for Climate Change and the Environment, and Lord Triesman, UK Minister for Africa, who felt that the credibility of the organisation was brought into question if it were to be "chaired by a representative of a government whose failed policies have destroyed its own economy."

Notwithstanding these developments and their bearing on the upcoming summit, Zimbabwe is suffering its worst economic crisis since independence in 1980 with inflation currently at around 6000 per cent and expected to rise. The country has seen horrific human rights abuses in various forms and has overtly opposed free and democratic processes.

The personalities and tensions

Clearly there exists more to this debate than meets the eye. Whilst the relations between Zimbabwe and the UK are well documented and noted as having deteriorated recently, the current situation is one of non-cooperation and finger-pointing. However, this has precipitated the formation of two camps – one which is vehemently opposed to Mugabe's attendance, whilst the other objects to his exclusion.

Gordon Brown is not alone in his threats to boycott the summit, and this includes any representative of the UK government. The very reason that the summit has been postponed since April 2003 has been the threat of boycott by other EU countries.

AU members feel that they are defending a principle which defends the right of all members to attend and the respect of non-interference. (African Union's Peace and Security Committee: "We resort to interference only in extreme cases of violence or genocide.") They cite other countries like Togo and Niger who do not respect democracy and suggest that Zimbabwe's problem lies with London. Perhaps the sentiments are best summed up in the words of AU Commission chairperson, Alpha Oumar Konare and the current president of the organisation, Ghanaian President John Kuffuor, who reaffirmed their position to visiting German Chancellor Angela Merkel: "We want the next EU-Africa summit to be a success and herald a new partnership. All Africans should be invited, this is the basis for a new partnership." Other voices have added their support to this call and Zambia's President Levy Mwanawasa – currently chairperson of the 14-member SADC – says he will boycott the summit if Mugabe is excluded, as will the head of the 53-member AU, John Kuffuor. This strength of feeling was backed by Gertrude Mongella, the Tanzanian President of the Pan-African Parliament when she accused Brown of "arm-twisting". Other voices backing Mugabe's attendance include Mozambique and those within the SADC.

Supporting the theory that the debate really is between Brown and Mugabe is the fact that there are some surprising voices in the Zimbabwe camp. Secretary General of the Commonwealth, New Zealander Don Mckinnon said one month ago: "Africa regards Mugabe as a hero and his exclusion would result in another African boycott. It's useful to have him there for the dialogue to go on. Africa's relationship with the EU is very important." Portugal openly criticised Brown for what it called "double standards". Mr Casaca pointed out that Brown was "levelling accusations of human rights violations at Zimbabwe while turning a blind eye to countries where gross violations are openly occurring on a daily basis". Although Louis Michel, the EU Development Commissioner, backed Mr Brown by demanding a ban on Mr Mugabe, saying "I too share concerns and, yes, I too would prefer it if Mugabe was not there", he added "however, would his presence be sufficient reason for not holding this very important event? The main objective, let's remember, is the summit itself and not the participants, whoever they might be." While moving to isolate Zimbabwe's government, Mr Brown announced more British aid money for the country. Already Zimbabwe's second biggest donor, Britain will provide an additional £8 million to be delivered through the World Food Programme.

Trevor Ncube, Zimbabwean publisher and a critic of Mugabe exiled in South Africa, said that in attempting to isolate Mugabe at this stage and by urging the EU to extend arms sanctions and travel bans against Zanu-PF members, Brown was diverting attention from the real issues behind the crisis. "It's a position that the rest of the world expects from the British but that is not what those seeking a solution in Zimbabwe are looking for now. We need pragmatic and bold leadership," he said. "This plays into Mugabe's hands. He wants to paint the situation as a battle between the British and Zimbabweans."

A senior member of Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change said that while he sympathised with the idea of stopping Mugabe from "strutting on the international stage", Brown's statement was not "clever or intuitive".

The reality, then, is this: if Portugal excludes Mugabe, and Mugabe does not attend on his own accord anyway, Africa might boycott it forcing yet another postponement. If Mugabe attends, invited or not, Africa will turn up and so too would EU countries – except perhaps a handful led by Britain. The only known result under these two scenarios would be that a cancellation would once again be detrimental for developmental opportunities which would slip through Africa's economic fingers. It is also necessary to try to rationalise Gordon Brown's attitude – why would he attend UN General Assembly meetings with Mugabe present but not the EU-AU summit? This raises the unfortunate question of the efficacy of the summit at all if it has been reduced to a platform for trade defiance and vitriol by historical enemies.

Of course compromise does exist as an opportunity. Zimbabwe could be encouraged to be represented by someone other than Mugabe, an option which would seem to be acceptable to Brown. This was indeed an option for Zimbabwe at a summit held in Burma last year attended by its foreign minister. Now, however, the same Simbarashe Mumbengegwi appears as number 78 on a list of 125 Zimbabweans subjected to travel restrictions.

The stance of church and government and non-governmental bodies

Notwithstanding the history which has led up to this debate the issue remains around what the churches stance is, and in particular the Diakonia Council of Churches' position is, on this issue in particular.

Clearly it is impossible to consider this in isolation. It is increasingly apparent that voices within our member churches would indicate a growing restlessness with the status quo. For many years church leaders have called for local and international intervention into the crisis within Zimbabwe.

Returning as a delegation member to Zimbabwe in 2005, Cardinal Wilfrid Napier, as President of the South African Catholic Bishop's Conference called on the UN Security Council to take responsibility for the crisis and act immediately. This was in reference particularly to the need for food aid, and the need for fair distribution thereof without political interference. The Cardinal added that were the UN to fail it would become complicit in the unfolding humanitarian disaster. The Cardinal then branded the Mugabe led government as guilty of a crime against humanity in relation to the politicisation of food. The Cardinal also stated that he intended on meeting with the South African government to "express our concern about the lack of response from all the leadership in Africa, political leadership in particular."

The Cardinal was outspoken then about the perceived “brotherhood which protected African leaders”: “It’s hard to understand how leaders in Africa who have committed themselves to certain things at Gleneagles about aid, and how they are going to develop their people and so on, can remain silent when one of their number is doing the very opposite and is actually undermining every reason why they are asking the West to help them. Mugabe’s conduct in Zimbabwe is undermining every reason why the West should help Africa”. On the subject of President Thabo Mbeki’s policy of “quiet diplomacy” the Cardinal said: “we would want to impress on him that it is totally illogical to continue talking about quiet diplomacy when people are dying. Action needs to be taken right away and the very least that needs to be done is to get Mugabe to stop the actions he is doing.... There are laws that Mugabe has put in place which make life intolerable... like the NGO Bill which results in nobody but the government being able to receive aid and to distribute it within the country. It would mean that only those who cow tow to Zanu PF would receive any of that. The Cardinal has been very outspoken and on another occasion referred to giving further aid to Zimbabwe as being likened to “giving money to an alcoholic beggar who tells you he has given up drink and will spend the money on food.”

In July 2005, the Executive Council of the Methodist Church of South Africa noted “there is little doubt that we are witnessing a tragedy of unprecedented enormity. We have on our hands a complete recipe for genocide.” They urged the international community to act “vigorously” to expose the tragedy of Zimbabwe. In September 2007, the local Methodist Conference reiterated its “great concern for Zimbabwe called on the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and SADC to find ways towards healing.” They stressed their role in finding ways to alleviate the plight of refugees and their support to those working on Zimbabwe programmes, particularly President Mbeki. Responding to the issue around the summit, Bishop Purity Malinga stated: “I think we have seen that when pressure is put on leaders of countries that are abusing the rights of people, it does help to change things, and so my sense is that if there was support to what Gordon Brown is suggesting, that is a way to speed up change. But it seems that there is no support for Brown and part of the reason for this is that Mugabe is singled out amongst others who have committed crimes against humanity. I don’t understand why there is so much tip toeing around Mugabe. There is pressure required to be put on Mugabe. If it means calling for support, this is a way our partners in Europe can assist.”

Namibia’s National Society for Human Rights commented that “leaders of dictatorial regimes out there can no longer hide behind the so-called principle of non-interference in the affairs of other states in order to get away with murder with impunity”. Notable is one of the first elements within the UN doctrine “to protect” which is the doctrine “to prevent” – defined as “to address both the root causes and the direct causes of internal conflict and other man-made crises putting populations at risk.”

Other politicians within South Africa have also commented on this state of affairs. Even the South African Communist Party's (SACP's) Blade Nzimande has been critical of Zimbabwe's decline into "failed progressive revolutions" characterised by "smear campaigns and palace politics". Recently Kader Asmal (formerly national minister of education) accused the Zimbabwe government of "conducting a tyrannical war on its won people" and he confessed that he should have spoken out earlier. He acknowledged that the silence had made him complicit and he questioned Pretoria's view that only Zimbabweans themselves could decide on their own future. "Why did I not speak before? I should have. I should have spoken as an internationalist campaigning for apartheid in South Africa and now speak as a proud citizen of a free South Africa who should have spoken out and campaigned against a regime which has brought Zimbabwe to its heels."

Asked for his response to this debate in particular, Bishop Rubin Phillip of the Anglican Diocese in Durban commented that "given the impasse in Zimbabwe viz a viz the political situation and the failure of the South African government and the SADC to play a meaningful role in bringing about transformation, the pressures brought about by Gordon Brown should be welcomed and not frowned upon." He added that "unless the international community does something, like boycotting, Mugabe and his regime will feel vindicated. So this is a peaceful, non-violent way of discouraging Mugabe and they (Gordon Brown and his supporters) should be supported." Bishop Rubin noted that the UK was continuing to provide relief to the country and said he felt that Brown was not trying to harm the country, but rather to get a message through to Mugabe.

But perhaps none have been more vocal than Nobel Peace Archbishop Desmond Tutu who commented last month that he was "devastated" by the human rights abuses of Mugabe but said that he was becoming more confident in Mbeki's efforts to coax Mugabe towards reform, although he openly criticised the "quiet diplomacy" route. Although Archbishop Tutu has expressed a level of confidence in Mbeki's approach recently, Zimbabwean civil society groups have harshly criticized the mediation approach. They are calling for a democratic people-driven approach rather than a "secret negotiation". The Archbishop has traditionally supported a wide and creative variety of interventions which aim to bring about change in policy. This was most recently evidenced through his show of solidarity for those suffering in Burma when he called for a boycott of well known golfer Gary Player's golf courses. This was in response to Player's commercial ties with the military junta in that country.

The Diakonia Council of Churches

As a Council serving a number of member churches we remain informed by the voices and policies of these members. To date no specific stance or position has been taken but that is not to say that our member churches themselves have not adopted positions and strategies reflecting these stances at various levels, and it

is clearly apparent that an emotive and complex issue such as this carries with it the potential for individuals to arise who reflect differing levels of passion and action in their responses to the call for justice.

There is no doubt that justice and peace are God's answer for Zimbabwe. There is also no doubt that there are many ways in which individuals and organisations can become involved in this process of securing long-term stability.

The Diakonia Council of Churches seeks to support its member churches in any and all initiatives which strive for justice, the alleviation of suffering and the installation of peace. We would support any non-violent and meaningful attempt to bring about change in Zimbabwe and would seek to urge all parties to secure the best compromise in the current debate around the summit. The Council would appear to be united in its call for ongoing and committed calls for intervention which are aimed at highlighting the need for urgent action on the part of the government of Zimbabwe. Clearly the EU-AU summit bodes well for the African continent as a whole, and Zimbabwe in particular, through the opportunities it presents. The presence or non-presence of either leader in the form of Mr Brown or Mr Mugabe will not, in itself, be detrimental to the process, if other compromises are negotiated by way of representation. It is sadly notable that the very issues that the summit seeks to address would indeed include those faced, perhaps most significantly, by poor countries like Zimbabwe and these can be most significantly alleviated and addressed by developed countries like the UK and its partners in Europe.

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