

# Mugabe's war on Africans

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Does anybody out there remember the African renaissance? It's nearly a decade now since we first heard murmurings about a new Africa in which democracy and the rule of law would replace tribalism, corruption and the rule of the Big Men. We were urged to look at the example of countries such as Uganda and Zambia where "new" kinds of African leaders were emerging. And after years of blood and thievery, much of it encouraged and enabled by the West, we rushed to believe in the renaissance. At last some good news out of Africa!

When President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa pronounced solemnly "I am an African" and went on to outline his vision of a renaissance that would sweep the continent from the Cape to the shores of the Mediterranean, only a few commentators dared interpose some awkward questions (for example: how committed were these new leaders to democracy and human rights, and why did the founding father of the renaissance, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, allow his army to plunder the neighbouring Congo?)

When Thabo Mbeki travelled to Zimbabwe and rode the inaugural journey of the luxurious Blue Train from Victoria Falls, he posed cheerfully for photographs with his counterpart, Robert Mugabe, and both men spoke of a "new" Africa, at a time when Mugabe's thugs were busy intimidating the political opposition and planning a campaign of terror aimed at white farmers and the thousands of workers who depend on them for a livelihood.

But African solidarity, or rather the unity of rulers, was more important than facing painful facts. The leaders spoke the language of the new Big Men. It was an artful rhetoric - Mr Mbeki is a master of the poetic turn of phrase - but it didn't fool the people. If you really wanted to know what was going on in Africa you read the independent press - newspapers such as the *Daily News* in Zimbabwe - and spoke with human rights activists. There was a renaissance in Africa but it wasn't the state-sponsored circus of Mbeki or Museveni; it belonged to the men and women who were busy creating a civil society across the continent and who faced imprisonment, torture and death for their efforts.

This week Mr Mugabe declared total war on these people. He disenfranchised hundreds of thousands by decreeing that Zimbabweans who lived abroad could not vote in the presidential elections due in March; he made it a crime to criticise the president and gave the police and army sweeping new powers; he made it impossible for foreign correspondents to work in the country and introduced licensing for local reporters; and he banned indepen-

dent election monitors from overseeing the elections.

I say "he" because these laws came from the President himself. His lackeys on the government benches in parliament voted them into law, but Robert Mugabe bears ultimate responsibility for bringing Zimbabwe down the last fateful mile towards fascism.

As if all that weren't enough, the head of the army issued a statement which in any sane country would be regarded as treason. General Vitalis Zvinashe said the army would not support any leader who threatened to reverse the gains of liberation. In the case of Zimbabwe's military top brass, the gains of liberation have been quite spectacular. Senior officers have been rewarded with land (much of it seized from white farmers) and have been allowed to plunder the wealth of the Congo, where Mr Mugabe has sent troops

oned by Thabo Mbeki and Mugabe loved him for it. It was quiet because Mr Mbeki didn't want to be seen to lecture another African leader about dumping whites off their land.

The cause of white farmers is not a popular one in the new Africa, and Mugabe successfully presented the crisis as a battle against colonialism. He never fooled his own people, but there were SADC leaders such as Namibia's President Sam Nujoma who lapped it up.

Mr Mbeki has of late abandoned his "quiet diplomacy"; that is, he now speaks with a growl rather than a whisper. But there are limits to what he can do: sending South African troops across the border is not a feasible option, nor would the sealing of his country's borders have much effect. But he can state publicly that South Africa will refuse to recognise or deal with any government that comes to power in a

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to assist the Kabila regime in Kinshasa.

The international reaction to this week's events typically has been lacking in energy. There has been grumbling, but President Bush still has to sign into law the package of sanctions agreed in Congress. He needs to do it fast. The British Government is urging the Commonwealth to take decisive action. But what a pathetic body the Commonwealth has proved itself. Confronted with this gravest of challenges to human rights it has blundered and stumbled, failing at every turn to confront Mugabe. He has treated the Commonwealth with contempt.

Now at last, with an election imminent, the Commonwealth gets around to talking about suspending Zimbabwe. Perhaps it could answer a simple question: how much innocent blood must be spilled, how many people terrorised and disenfranchised, before a country is suspended? If the Commonwealth cannot take decisive action now, it should disband in shame. It will have failed the people of Zimbabwe and made a mockery of the principles of good governance that it has sworn to promote.

The same can be said of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the main forum for governments in the region. The rulers of South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Namibia, Mozambique and Swaziland could see what was happening in Zimbabwe but opted for "quiet diplomacy" with Mugabe. This was the tactic champi-

rigged election. Mr Mugabe can continue in power even if the EU and the US isolate him, but he cannot do so if South Africa refuses to play along.

Such a stand might well cause a split in the SADC, but South Africa's interests are bigger than those of a useless regional talking shop. The country's currency has been experiencing a devastating collapse. There has been talk in Johannesburg of speculators undermining the currency. Perhaps. But one of the more likely causes is the deep unease felt by local business and foreign investors over Mr Mbeki's handling of the Zimbabwe crisis. There have been large outflows of cash from South Africa, as wealthy locals look north and wonder to themselves whether the chaos could happen in South Africa.

I believe there are sound reasons why South Africa will succeed - not least the power of civil society - but there is no denying the extreme nervousness the Zimbabwe crisis has created. It does not take great powers of prophecy to recognise a disaster looming for Zimbabwe and Africa. The rest of the world can and should take firm action but this is Mr Mbeki's hour of decision.

If he lets it be known that a rigged election will not be recognised, then the days of tyranny in Zimbabwe are numbered. Only in that circumstance would it be possible for Mr Mbeki to speak of an African renaissance without hearing the hollow laughter of his oppressed fellow Africans.

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