



## Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

### Background on Zimbabwe February 2009

*In Zimbabwe ... the situation remains critical and considerable humanitarian assistance is needed.*

-- Pope Benedict XVI, January 8, 2009

#### **BACKGROUND**

Over the last few years the government of Zimbabwe, led by President Robert Mugabe, has carried out a reign of repression over this once free and prosperous country of 11 million people. The government has destroyed what was once a vibrant economy. Inflation is the highest in the world, currently 231,000,000% according to the BBC. The economy has shrunk by 60%; unemployment is about 85% and 90% of the population lives in poverty. Up to a third of the country's population has fled the country for political and economic reasons and has taken refuge in neighboring countries, Europe and the U.S. Zimbabwe is also suffering from the effects of the worst harvest in memory. Up to 45% of the population—5.1 million people—will rely on the World Food Program (WFP) for sustenance in 2009. However, the WFP faces a funding shortfall and its October 2008 request for \$140 million in additional support from the international community has so far gone unheeded.

Health conditions in Zimbabwe have deteriorated. The HIV infection rate is 25%; life expectancy has plummeted from 60 years in 1990 to 37 years today. Hospitals have been shut down and medical supplies are increasingly scarce. Qualified medical personnel are leaving the country or working privately at high costs affordable only by the wealthy in Harare, the capital. The crumbling infrastructure has contributed to a cholera outbreak that has killed at least 3,000 people and threatens 300,000 more. The city's water has been cut off because of a lack of purification chemicals and in some areas sewage runs in the streets.

The situation deteriorated further in the wake of the March 29, 2008 elections. After a long delay, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission released the presidential results giving Morgan Tsvangirai (Movement for Democratic Change - MDC) 47.9% to Mugabe's 43.2% (Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front ZANU-PF). The opposition originally claimed to have won over 50% of the vote making their candidate the outright winner. They called for President Mugabe to step down, assuring him that he would not be prosecuted and could retire in peace.

In response to this embarrassing loss, ZANU-PF launched a campaign of intimidation and terror against persons who they believed voted for the opposition. Opposition party leaders were imprisoned and beaten while their offices were raided and ransacked. There are claims that over thirty people were killed and 700 treated in hospitals for injuries sustained from beatings and up to 500 women and girls were sexually assaulted or raped.

The runoff election was held on June 27, 2008. In an internationally condemned contest that was severely flawed by massive intimidation and violence (and from which Tsvangirai withdrew citing political violence), Mugabe was reelected with 85.5% of the vote to Tsvangirai's 9.3%. Britain and the United States proposed a UN resolution sanctioning the leaders of Zimbabwe, but it was vetoed by China and Russia. In September, Mugabe and Tsvangirai negotiated a power-sharing Memo of Understanding whereby Mugabe retained the presidency and Tsvangirai became prime minister. Since

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then, the two rivals have attempted to negotiate a final power-sharing agreement, but that effort failed over President Mugabe's refusal to relinquish control of the Ministry of Home Affairs, which commands the police. ZANU-PF already had retained control of the military and state security. The Southern African Development Community (SADC), an alliance of nine states in Southern Africa, continued mediation efforts until early February 2009 when the MDC agreed to join the unity government. Many observers inside Zimbabwe and in the international community hold little hope that the new arrangement will provide a legitimate government and may only entrench President Mugabe as President. More importantly, the government may not be able to offer much needed support to a long suffering people.

In April 2008 the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and the Evangelical Fellowship had signed a joint letter that decried the horrible living conditions forced on Zimbabweans and the repression that the government has unleashed on its people. They called on the countries in the Southern Africa region to help stop the suffering and the violence.

By December 2008, there were calls for Mugabe to step down. South African Nobel Peace Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu stated that President Mugabe should resign or be tried by the International Criminal Court. The U.S. and the U.K. have also said it is time for Mugabe to go. In the region, Zimbabwe's leadership is losing support as the situation worsens and threatens surrounding countries.

In January 2009 the Southern Africa Conference of Catholic Bishops deplored the situation in Zimbabwe and called for Robert Mugabe to step down. They also called on the Southern Africa Development Community, especially the leadership of South Africa, to stop supporting the Mugabe regime and to increase its pressure on Zimbabwe leaders to end the political deadlock and relieve the suffering of the people of Zimbabwe.

## **USCCB POSITION**

The USCCB has worked closely with and supported the leadership of the Church in Zimbabwe to monitor the situation in country and to respond as best it could. The Church there is in a difficult position because political conditions in Zimbabwe are threatening and neighboring countries, Europe and the United States have very limited influence. In May 2008, Bishop Thomas Wenski wrote to the Bishops of Zimbabwe in support of their calls for an end to the violence and the release of election results. Bishop Wenski also wrote a letter to then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to convey the joint statement from the Christian Leaders of Zimbabwe and to support their message. Bishop John Ricard visited Zimbabwe in August 2008 to meet with the Bishop's Conference to express the U.S. Conference's solidarity with the Church of Zimbabwe.

## **ACTION REQUESTED**

The USCCB urges the U.S. Government to:

1. Assist and encourage the Southern African Development Community to provide effective leadership and mediation to bring a peaceful end to the political deadlock and crisis in Zimbabwe.
2. Work with the international community, especially the United Kingdom, the European Union, China and Russia to pressure the Robert Mugabe administration to transition peacefully to a legitimate government that will serve the common good of the Zimbabwean people.
3. Increase humanitarian assistance to the millions of Zimbabweans who are suffering.
4. Stand ready to support in concrete ways a responsible transition to a new, legitimate, democratic government in Zimbabwe.

**For information:** visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/callafrica/zimbabwe.shtml> or contact *Stephen Hilbert*, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3149, [Shilbert@usccb.org](mailto:Shilbert@usccb.org).

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