



FRUSTRATION AS TALKS MISS DEADLINE

Zimbabweans say politicians seem too worried about their own futures to think of wider problems.

By Joseph Nhlanhla in Bulawayo

As the deadline set for talks between Zimbabwe's rival parties expired on August 4, many ordinary people are worried about the economic consequences of any delay in finding a political settlement.

According to the Memorandum of Understanding signed on July 21 by President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF and the two factions of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, the negotiations were scheduled to conclude within two weeks.

The result, it is thought, could be some kind of transitional government which could both lead Zimbabwe out of the current political impasse and begin reversing the long-term devastation of its economy.

The pressure was on the negotiators to reach a settlement within that time



Credit: Lazele

MDC secretary general Tendai Biti outside a hotel in Harare where the signing is to be held. Picture taken August 10.

Negotiators were under pressure to deliver results within two weeks.

frame, but international media reported that the talks ground to a halt in late July, with the teams flying back from South Africa to update their respective political leaderships. At that point it was apparent that the deadline was going to be missed.

Analysts said the tight deadline was intended as a way of pressuring Mugabe to agree to terms that could

NEWS IN BRIEF

- Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe and opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai were locked in talks until the early hours of August 11, having failed to reach agreement on sticking points on a political settlement. There are reports that Tsvangirai will become prime minister while Mugabe remains president. The disagreement boils down to which of them would wield real executive power.
- Zwelinzima Vavi, head of South Africa's main trade union confederation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, said on August 10 that President Mugabe should be barred from an upcoming regional summit if the power-sharing talks fail.
- Donor countries on August 8 warned Zimbabwean government ministers that they would be held personally liable for any humanitarian crisis arising from their refusal to lift the ban on relief agencies.
- Police raided the offices of the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition on August 7, Voice of America reported.

force him to cede at least some of his powers. However, failure to agree on whether he or Morgan Tsvangirai, who heads the main MDC faction, should head any new administration remains a sticking-point.

For ordinary Zimbabweans, the extension of the negotiations means no end to the economy's implosion is in sight. Some are irritated that politicians appear to be ignoring the urgency of the situation.

“This could drag on for much longer” — former ZAPU guerrilla Thomas Selo

“Some of us did not think the setting of a deadline was practical, but now that the deadline had been passed without any major breakthroughs, it means this could drag on for much longer,” said Thomas Selo, a former freedom fighter with PF ZAPU, a party that was absorbed by ZANU-PF in the late 1980s. “Negotiations are about making compromises, but it is obvious here that this thing is now beyond the control of the people of Zimbabwe, who have to do nothing but watch as politicians fail to put the people first.”

Enoch Paradzai of the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe expressed similar disappointment, saying, “We were looking forward to the talks to bring about something for us. It means our hardships are set to continue.

“We are in dire straits and what we want is not a political solution to our crisis, but an economic solution. They can keep talking, but for us the economy must take first priority.”

Although the negotiators are under a blanket ban on talking to the media, reports from the talks suggest the process has been dogged by personality clashes, and that hard-line members of the talks teams are reluctant to make any concessions.

The opposition may have underestimated ZANU-PF's determination not to give ground.

According to human rights activist Desmond Zondo, the opposition may have underestimated ZANU-PF's resolve not to give ground.

“Obviously the two MDCs... firmly believed they had an upper hand, and leeway, in that Mugabe had agreed to the talks,” said Zondo. “But with people like Chinamasa at the table, this impasse was to be expected.”

Mugabe's chief negotiator, Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa, is seen as a hawk who will give as little away as he can.

Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa, who is Mugabe's chief negotiator at the talks, is seen as a hawk who will give as little away to the opposition as he can.

Top officials in Mugabe's administration have much to fear from political change. As well as losing their

positions, some risk probes into the source of their assets or their role in past human rights abuses, including the 100-plus people the MDC says were murdered by ZANU-PF and its allies in the run-up to the controversial second-round presidential election of June 27.

In the past, Tendai Biti, now chief negotiator for the MDC faction led by Tsvangirai — who pulled out of the June 27 polls because of mounting violence — has said that if the party wins power, it will investigate alleged crimes committed by members of the current regime.

“There is nothing I can do but wait for these people [political leaders] to decide our fate” — housewife Pauline Khumalo.

Amid the uncertainty over whether the talks can really produce a workable compromise between apparently reconcilable political forces, many people like housewife Pauline Khumalo believe the politicians are simply being selfish — more concerned with their internecine troubles than with the real problems facing Zimbabweans.

“I hate feeling helpless, but there is nothing I can do but wait for these people [political leaders] to decide our fate,” she said. “This country used to be paradise, but as long as these politicians keep thinking about themselves, there will be no country to speak of.”

Joseph Nhlanhla is the pseudonym of a reporter in Zimbabwe. ■

GRACE MUGABE LAUNCHES CHARM OFFENSIVE

Campaign apparently aimed to make people forget the violence that rocked the country in the three months after the March elections.

By Benedict Unendoro in Harare

Zimbabwe's First Lady, Grace Mugabe, has gone on a public relations blitz in what analysts say is an attempt to give a human face to State House.

The state-owned media have likened her to an Old Testament heroine. "Like the Biblical Deborah," read an article in the government mouthpiece, *The Herald*, "who led the Israelites when confusion reigned supreme among the children of God, Amai Mugabe rose as a mother of the nation."

"Amai" is Shona for mother; prefixed to a name it bestows dignity and matriarchal wisdom.

"In a nation that had to contend with a resurgence of political violence following the harmonised elections," the article continued, "Amai Mugabe toured homesteads of victims of the barbarism and helped them begin to reconstruct their lives, literally from the ashes. And while taking the opportunity to help the victims, Amai Mugabe became one of the first national political leaders to condemn violence after the elections."

Articles in the state-owned media distance the First Lady from the violence that ensued when her husband lost the March 29 presidential election to opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai. By association, they also exonerate President Robert Mugabe.

A veteran journalist working in the state media told IWPR that reporters and feature writers have been instructed to write glowingly about the



Credit: Lazele

Robert Mugabe and his wife Grace, soon after their arrival at the National Heroes Acre in Harare. Picture taken August 11.

First Couple in an attempt to airbrush their image in the face of an uncertain future.

Government media distance the First Lady from political violence, and by extension her husband, too.

"I think the whole thinking is that whatever the result of the negotiations in Pretoria, the two should be seen by the general populace in good light," he said, referring to the inter-party talks mediated by South African President Thabo Mbeki to end Zimbabwe's political crisis. It is becoming increasingly clear that the talks are expected to deprive Mugabe of most of his powers and signal the twilight of his political career.

In the aftermath of the June 27 presidential run-off, which became a one-man race after Tsvangirai pulled

out, citing violence against his people, Grace Mugabe went on a whirlwind tour of the country's rural areas, distributing food, blankets, shoes and agricultural equipment. She addressed rallies in which she denounced political violence, which she attributed to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, even though reports by foreign diplomats and human rights organisations blamed the ruling ZANU-PF.

On the post-June 27 tours, the First Lady's tone was in direct contrast to her speeches prior to both the March 29 elections and the June run-off, when she preached hatred against Tsvangirai.

The veteran journalist said the aim of the new campaign was to make people forget the violence that rocked the country in the three months after the March ballot and instead see the First Couple as benevolent.

"But I don't think people forget that easily," he said. He pointed out that more than two decades have passed

since the Gukurahundi massacres, when government troops murdered up to 20,000 people in a bid to destroy ZAPU, the rival liberation group-turned-political-party. And up to today, the people of Matabeleland and the Midlands, most of them Ndebele, who bore the brunt of the violence, have not forgiven Mugabe.

Parallel to Grace Mugabe's campaign are attempts to portray the president as a revolutionary who brought independence and economic empowerment.

For the most part, the Ndebele people have voted consistently against him. The climax of Grace Mugabe's public relations campaign came on her 43rd birthday on July 23 when she unveiled an orphanage in Mazowe, just 30 kilometres north of the capital Harare. The orphanage boasts 30 houses nearing completion. She is also the patron of Danhiko Trust, a school for people with disabilities.

Newsnet, the news wing of the government-controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, reported, "The First Lady, Amai Grace Mugabe, turns 43 today with a determined effort to see the improvement of lives among disadvantaged children in Zimbabwe. The plight of disadvantaged children including HIV and AIDS orphans and children with disabilities has been a major priority in her charity work. The First Lady's patronage of Danhiko project, which is a school for people with disabilities, and her grand plan to establish an orphanage in Mazowe bear testimony to her commitment to disadvantaged communities."

Running parallel to Grace Mugabe's campaign is that of her husband's, casting him as the true revolutionary who has brought economic empowerment and total independence to his people. Spearheaded by Gideon Gono, governor of the Reserve Bank

of Zimbabwe, the Basic Commodities Supply Side Intervention, or Bacossi, campaign has seen Mugabe commissioning People's Shops, where basic food commodities are sold for a song.

Bacossi has made it possible for millions of people in disadvantaged communities to buy food which they would otherwise not be able to afford. In theory, the facility is open to all people regardless of their political affiliations. Mugabe has been known in the past to use food as a political weapon.

A history professor at the University of Zimbabwe, who preferred not to be named, said the Bacossi campaign was aimed at casting Mugabe as the "benevolent despot".

The idea, he said, is that "at the end people will say, 'although he has killed people and maimed thousands, he has given us land, and agricultural implements and has economically empowered us', and they will be ready to forgive him".

"In history, benevolent despots only remained in power as long as the people allowed them to" — warning from Zimbabwean history professor.

But he too doubted if the strategy would work, "In history, benevolent despots only remained in power as long as the people allowed them to; if the people had a change of mind then the despots were deposed quickly. For almost ten years, Mugabe has been fighting the will of the people by stealing elections."

He said the openly populist moves Mugabe has made in the past ten years, such as the land reform programme and now Bacossi, were meant to disguise his desperation to stay in power. Now that the game is about up, he has to be portrayed as

the man who remained steadfast in defending his country and empowering his people.

"But if Mugabe has improved the lives of the people, it was only to strengthen his own authority," he said.

While the international and local privately owned media accuse the First Lady of spending taxpayers' money on shopping jaunts abroad, and Mugabe himself of an insatiable thirst for power, the First Couple has still managed to donate substantial sums of money to community projects in a bid to win the hearts of rural people.

The First Couple has donated substantial sums of money to rural community projects in a bid to win hearts and minds.

However, analysts remain sceptical that they will be able to win over the urban population, who have supported the MDC since its emergence in 2000.

Robert Mugabe married his private secretary, Grace Marufu, in 1994 under controversial circumstances; at least one of their three children was born when Mugabe was still married to his first wife, the Ghanaian Sally Heyfron, who at the time was battling a kidney ailment that eventually killed her.

While the union was kept secret, two Zimbabwean journalists who published the story in the independent Financial Gazette — Trevor Ncube and Simba Makunke — were harassed by state agents and eventually forced to quit their jobs. Ncube is now the publisher of the respected independent newspapers, the Zimbabwe Independent and Standard, and of the Mail & Guardian in South Africa.

Benedict Unendoro is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe. ■

CIVIC GROUPS DEMAND HEARING

Zimbabwean non-government organisations say their concerns are ignored because they are shut out of political talks.

By Mike Nyoni in Harare

Negotiators at the Zimbabwe crisis talks in Pretoria, South Africa, are under growing pressure from civic organisations which want to be more directly involved in the process.

As talks between the main political parties continued beyond the August 4 deadline, all three leaders — President Robert Mugabe of ZANU-PF and Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara of the two factions of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC — indicated that they were largely happy with the progress of the talks. Tsvangirai pointed out that some “sticking-points” remained.

“The main civil society organisations believe neither Mugabe nor Tsvangirai.”

Analysts believe the obstacles to progress could be fundamental differences at the negotiations over whether Mugabe or his main rival Tsvangirai should lead a transitional government. Both of them claim that right, based on two different election results — the March 29 poll in which Tsvangirai got more votes than Mugabe, and the June 27 run-off which Tsvangirai boycotted, citing violence against his supporters.

For Zimbabwe’s main civil society organisations, neither man is acceptable. A group of these organisations said in mid-July that they would not recognise an interim administration headed by Mugabe or



Credit: Lazele

People at the National Heroes Acre hold a banner in support of Thabo Mbeki’s role in the talks. Picture taken August 11.

Tsvangirai, and instead wanted to see a neutral figure fill the role.

As the talks dragged on past their two-week deadline this week, more organisations voiced demands to have a greater say in the talks process.

The militant Progressive Teachers’ Union of Zimbabwe, PTUZ, which claims to represent the interests of most teachers in the country, voiced concern at the restricted number of participants in the negotiations, from which it said the “voice of civic society” was palpably missing.

Only political parties are involved in the talks in Pretoria.

“It is our conviction that dialogue would have been more meaningful if the players were broadened than is the current scenario. Reducing participants to ZANU-PF and two MDC formations led by Tsvangirai and Mutambara is at best too simplistic and at worst a fabrication of political processes,” said a statement issued by the PTUZ, recalling that the negotiations which led to Zimbabwean independence in 1980 were “broader than the current dialogue”.

The trade union indicated that it was sceptical that the talks could succeed in their present format, given the deep divisions between ZANU-PF and the MDC and the “secrecy and mystery” surrounding the talks.

The Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, an umbrella body which represents 350 organisations, also expressed concern about whether the process would

“Reducing participants to ZANU-PF and two MDC formations... is at best too simplistic and at worst a fabrication” — teaching union.

result in an effective political deal — and it warned against “quick fixes” which “do not address the constitutional and democratic deficit”.

“The coalition is utterly opposed to a pact agreed between the political elite which does not adequately address the socioeconomic and political crisis, which is by and large... a crisis of

governance and legitimacy,” the group said in media advertisements this week.

The Media Alliance of Zimbabwe, which brings together key players from the sector, has a particular interest in ensuring that any new constitution that comes out of the talks contains specific guarantees of free speech.

Politicians have ignored calls for greater inclusivity.

However, the alliance complained this week that with no media figures present at the negotiations, and participants barred from even speaking to reporters, it was not in a

position to press this important demand.

The Zimbabwe Human Rights Association also said the talks should have been “more inclusive”, with “the input of civil society organisations”.

So far, politicians appear to be ignoring such calls for greater inclusivity or a broader forum.

An analyst who did not want to be named said that whatever the merits of such demands, the short deadline set by the July 21 Memorandum of Understanding did not allow of it.

The analysts said it was feared that expanding the format of the process would make it harder to stop information leaking out.

“The real fear is that expanding the negotiating process could raise more dust than shed light on the way forward,” he said. “The real key issues in the current negotiations are about leadership, so there is simply no meaningful role for any of these civic society organisations.”

“There is simply no meaningful role for any of these civic society organisations” — Zimbabwean analyst.

Mike Nyoni is the pseudonym of a reporter in Zimbabwe. ■

The Zimbabwe Crisis Report is an initiative of IWPR-Africa’s Zimbabwe Programme. This programme promotes democratization and good governance with Southern Africa and contributes to the development of a culture of human rights and the rule of law. Focusing on Zimbabwe the programme has three core components —

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