**Rights violations: Zimbabwe must face the truth
By Dzikamai Bere, Zimbabwe Independent
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Societies emerging from a legacy of massive human rights violations are torn between fear and hope.  What must be done with the ugly past?  Should it be confronted, or should it be buried forever? This is the challenge that confronts Zimbabwe’s coalition government as it prepares for the next election. Is Zimbabwe ready to confront the question of truth? The Standard of May 1 reported that President Robert Mugabe had “pledged” to set up a team to look into Gukurahundi (Midlands and Matabeleland atrocities) and map the way forward.  This is yet to happen.

Gukurahundi still stands out as the worst of the many atrocities committed by the government or people acting with its blessings in independent Zimbabwe.  There have been many discussions around Gukurahundi and other atrocities in Zimbabwe.

In March 2010, Zanu PF MPs walked out of parliament after their colleagues from the MDC-T proposed an investigation into the Matabeleland atrocities.  In the same month, the Zimbabwe Republic Police in Bulawayo shut down an exhibition on Gukurahundi by artist Owen Maseko. Maseko was arrested and spent the weekend in cells. In November 2010, war veterans’ leader Joseph Chinotimba demanded that minister David Coltart apologises for calling Gukurahundi“genocide”.

Zimbabwe’s coalition government is mandated to ensure democratisation and economic stability.  One of the things that have occupied the thoughts of the Zimbabwean people is the need to recover the truth of what happened in our past as a way of building sustainable peace.

The intellectual discourse is flooded with theories on dealing with the past. In February 2009, the Organ on National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration was formed with the mandate to advice government properly on how to deal with the past.  The Organ has remained largely unknown to its constituency, ignorant of its mandate and its ministers discordant in matters of policy regarding national healing.

Civil society has tried to fill in the gap.

The Law Society of Zimbabwe (LSZ) as part of its contribution to the constitution-making process in Zimbabwe produced its model constitution towards the end of 2010.  In this model, LSZ addresses the issue of truth and suggests the creation of a commission to recover the truth and facilitate reconciliation.

In August 2011, the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum published the findings of a nationwide survey on transitional justice. According to the report, 83% of the respondents believe that victims of political violence should be rehabilitated through counselling, reparations, prosecution of perpetrators, truth recovery and apologies from the perpetrators. In short, the people are saying, “Let’s deal with it!”

Many sectors have made similar recommendations both locally and internationally.  The government has responded by accusing those pushing for truth recovery of trying to turn back the clock or “opening old wounds”.  Is it? Maybe.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Chairperson of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), writes in the foreword to the TRC Report:
“However painful the experience, the wounds of the past must not be allowed to fester. They must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured on them so they can heal.

This is not to be obsessed with the past. It is to take care that the past is properly dealt with for the sake of the future.”
There are no illusions about the achievements of the South African TRC or any other truth commission.  Since the formation of the first truth commission in Uganda in 1974, over 45 truth commissions have been instituted the world over in an attempt to recover the truth and foster reconciliation.  There are thousands of disillusioned victims who have no kind words for these commissions.  However, the achievements cannot be ignored. Their failures are nowhere outside the realms of humanity.

What we can learn from all these efforts at recovering the truth, especially from our southern neighbours, is that there are times in the history of a society when men and women have to be brave enough to confront the question of truth, truthfully.  It takes courage and determination; and that was the magic of Nelson Mandela. He confronted it.

Since the 1990s, there seem to have been an explosion of the search for truth.  Individuals and societies hunger for truth. The world has moved along this overwhelming demand for truth. The generations are anxious.  It is part of the global transition from repression towards more accountable and transparent governance. This world movement is difficult to ignore.

On March 24 2011, the Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon launched the International Day for the Right to the Truth of Victims of Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims.  On September 29 2011, the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution (A/HRC/18/L22) providing for the appointment of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence.  Truth commissions have been set up in Brazil, Sri-Lanka, and the Ivory Coast, to mention but a few. In the process, international law is taking the same complexion, international and regional courts are becoming less tolerant of those who block the rights of victims to know the truth.

The impact of truth commissions is much more than recovering a record of the past and making recommendations.  It is a recovery of humanity itself by allowing societies to reflect collectively on the choices they made in the past.  It is retracing our memory to find out where exactly we lost our soul.  Commissions are facilitating participation of societies in governance in a more consultative, engaging and transparent manner.  Democracy is evolving rapidly. It is not just about open debate; it is also about community dialogue.  It is not just about the casting of ballots after five years and thereafter let politicians decide what happens to our everyday life.

Governments are challenged to open wide the windows and doors to allow for more citizen participation in what happens every day. With this growing movement of participative governance, which will soon intensify with the setting up of a UN working group on the question of truth, can Zimbabwe continue to shy away from the truth?  What is at stake?

Opening up the Pandora’s box is more than just a question of truth and memory.  It is a matter of increased citizen involvement in governance.  Our future is too important to be left to spin doctors. Zimbabwe is lagging behind; its leaders are going against the tide of history. We must now open the doors and confront critical questions, including the question of truth.

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