

Facing Mass Murder in Zimbabwe

By Kevin Engle and Gregory Stanton

August 12, 2005

"We would be better off with only six million people, with our own people who support the liberation struggle. We don't want all these extra people."

Didymus Mutasa – Zimbabwe's Minister of State for National Security, Lands, Lands Reform, and Resettlement – August 2002

Operation Murambatsvina has been, "...a long cherished desire."

Robert Mugabe – Executive President of Zimbabwe – June 2005

Like a snared animal, tearing at itself in desperation, Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party, trapped by their own failed policies, and in a frantic attempt to hold onto power, are tearing into Zimbabwe's own citizens. At first cloaking his ruin of Zimbabwe's economy as land reform, Mugabe has now turned on his urban poor, bulldozing hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses.

According to the United Nations *Report on the Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe to Assess the Scope and Impact of Operation Murambatsvina*, there are "three main categories of victims – those who have lost their homes, those who lost their livelihoods, and those who lost both."

There is little doubt that this list will soon contain a fourth main category – those who have lost their lives.

Beginning on May 19, 2005, Operation Murambatsvina ("Operation Drive out the Filth"), having already left 700,000 homeless, and directly impacting the lives of a further 2.4 million, is the most recent manifestation of the Mugabe/ZANU-PF's systematic progression toward a governmental policy of overt mass murder.

Make no mistake, what we are currently witnessing in Zimbabwe—as Operation Murambatsvina continues to unfold—constitutes nothing less than the first stages of a centrally organized program of mass murder on a scale of the genocides of Rwanda and Darfur.

With a frightening diligence, the Mugabe regime is squandering what few assets it is still able to squeeze out of the freefalling Zimbabwean economy, to fuel a policy that aims at the elimination of all potential opposition, an opposition that Augustine Chihuri, the Zimbabwean Police Commissioner, describes as a, "crawling mass of maggots bent on destroying the economy."

The use of such dehumanizing language is one of the surest early warning signs of political mass murder.

The Devil is in the Details

Genocide is a process and not an event. The Mugabe regime has committed genocide before and it has begun the genocidal process again.

In October 1980, when then Prime Minister Mugabe signed an agreement with North Korean President, Kim Il Sung, providing that the North Koreans train what was to become the elite “5 Brigade” of the Zimbabwean army, he launched an organized process of genocide.

5 Brigade, comprised largely of Shona-speaking members of the armed wing of what is now the ZANU-PF—standing outside of the army chain of command, and answering only to Mugabe himself—unleashed the Gukurahundi (“the early rain which washes away the chaff before the spring rains”), the regime’s first, and still unpunished, genocide.

While an accurate death toll for the Gukurahundi is all but impossible to ascertain, an estimated 20,000 people were murdered by members of 5 Brigade, the ZANU-PF Youth Militia, the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO), and the Police Internal Security Intelligence Unit (PISI).

The Gukurahundi constituted the Mugabe regime’s first use of food as a weapon of suppression, with over 400,000 Zimbabwean citizens driven to the brink of starvation before 5 Brigade was disbanded in 1986.

While mainly about the consolidation of raw political power, and the suppression of any opposition, the Gukurahundi was also genocide, as its victims were largely Matabele.

Having crippled those he saw as directly threatening the ZANU-PF government in the 1980’s, Mugabe next attempted to consolidate his political power by co-opting Zimbabwe’s parliamentary democracy and its judiciary, hoping to turn both into rubberstamps for his dictatorship.

Mugabe and the ZANU-PF were shocked when, in the Referendum of February 2000, a majority of Zimbabweans, rejected proposed constitutional changes designed to strengthen the powers of the presidency. The ZANU-PF unleashed a violent and coordinated attack on those perceived as threatening their grip on power, the political opposition party (Movement for Democratic Change), the independent news media, and Zimbabwe’s commercial farming sector.

Mugabe’s assault on the Zimbabwean people—again utilizing the same tools of intimidation, torture, murder, and terror, so viciously applied during the Gukurahundi—has escalated into Operation Murambatsvina. No longer content to control and suppress its’ political opposition, the Mugabe/ZANU-PF regime has implemented a systematic policy of forced relocation and mass murder by attrition.

Mugabe’s policy of murder by homelessness, neglect, and starvation—organized at the highest levels of government—constitutes a crime against humanity as defined by international law.

Action not Discussion

As with Sudan and Niger, discussions about the situation in Zimbabwe have been taking place within the international community’s halls of power. The UN has compiled a damning report, the US and UK, in concert with other nations, have called on the Mugabe regime to cease and desist, while NGOs around the world have identified specific steps that can be taken to end this grave humanitarian crisis, yet the power elite in Zimbabwe have shown open contempt at demands that they end Operation Murambatsvina, a program of destruction that Mugabe cynically claims is meant to “bring joy to the people.”

Given Mugabe's evident refusal to end the policies that will lead to the extermination, by attrition, of hundreds of thousands of Zimbabwean citizens, the time for discussion and hand wringing has passed. Now it is time for those nations with the moral will, and the necessary resources, to act decisively – either with, or without, the approval of Mugabe, the ZANU-PF, or this criminal regime's apologists.

Facing Zimbabwean Mass Murder

Mugabe, called upon to take measured, reasonable, and responsible steps to end the humanitarian crisis caused by Operation Murambatsvina – has refused.

Mugabe, offered humanitarian support if only he agrees to allow independent, international aid agencies to distribute assistance to those in the most dire straits, free from the corrupt influence of the ZANU-PF and its self-serving functionaries – has refused.

Mugabe, offered a desperately needed influx of foreign exchange credits, if only he agrees to enter into talks with his opponents – has refused.

Mugabe, called upon to provide international access to assist the hundreds of thousands of now homeless and hopeless victims of his brutal campaign of “urban cleansing,” – has refused.

In fact, Mugabe has even gone so far as to deny that these victims exist, commenting to reporters on the subject when in Libya for the recent African Union (AU) summit: “Where are they? We don't know about those. It's just nonsense.”

Mugabe and the ZANU-PF regime in Zimbabwe must not be given yet another opportunity that they can refuse!

Never Again or Again and Again?

What remains is for the world's governments to decide whether they want to look back on this time in pride at having acted to avert another humanitarian disaster, a “tsunami,” as its victims have named it, a program of mass murder, to call it what it is; or in shame, at their collective complicity in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

The dying has already begun in Zimbabwe. Will the “Never Again,” invoked piously after Rwanda, again translate into “again and again?”

As Judith Todd, the Zimbabwean human rights activist observed in June 2005, “If, in bitter winter, you deprive people and their children of shelter, and thus also their food and clothing and warmth; if you deprive them of their tools of trade and their means of survival, you do this for one reason only; you intend them to die....”

Kevin Engle is an independent researcher who lived in Zimbabwe. Gregory Stanton, President of Genocide Watch and James Farmer Professor of Human Rights at the University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, Virginia, has conducted genocide prevention training in Zimbabwe.