

## **A poor excuse for inaction**

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AS YOU read this comment on the state of play in Zimbabwe, try to imagine I am not a white westerner. We'll get back to why. More than 4-million Zimbabweans now need food aid; unemployment is more than 70%; fuel shortages are chronic; and inflation is rocketing in the triple digits. The World Bank recently described Zimbabwe's economic situation as "unprecedented for a country not at war".

Zimbabwe's long slide into economic meltdown, and its deepening humanitarian crisis, are bad news, not only for its own people but for the entire region, in particular SA. As President Thabo Mbeki said recently: SA would "inherit all the consequences of a Zimbabwe collapse".

And now, with the catastrophic slum and street trader clearance campaign, Operation Murambatsvina, a disastrous situation has become even worse. Between May and July, this government operation displaced more than 700,000 black Zimbabweans from their homes, sources of livelihood or both; forced 500,000 children out of school or seriously disrupted their education; caused a number of deaths from exposure; and adversely affected about 2.4-million citizens — nearly 20% of the population.

These are the facts documented in the devastating report from United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Kofi Annan's special envoy, Anna Tibaijuka — the Tanzanian director of UN-Habitat, the UN Human Settlements Programme.

Annan described Operation Murambatsvina as "profoundly distressing", doing "a catastrophic injustice to as many as 700,000 of Zimbabwe's poorest citizens through indiscriminate actions, carried out with disquieting indifference to human suffering". Tibaijuka's report strongly calls on the government to halt immediately any further demolition of homes, to redress the damage done, and hold accountable those responsible for the injuries caused by the operation.

Are any of these facts and judgments less true — and is the situation in Zimbabwe any less critical — because the writer now retailing them is not a black African? It's a fair question, because I and other white westerners expressing alarm about Zimbabwe are constantly met with the suggestion, express or implied, that our indignation is selective.

Why, I was repeatedly asked during a recent visit to SA, including by people in high places, am I — and the International Crisis Group which I head — going out of our way to pick on Zimbabwe's leadership when there are so many other bad governments out there in Africa and elsewhere, in many cases causing death, destruction and human misery on a significantly greater scale? Could it have something to do, by any chance, with President Robert Mugabe's particular pre-occupation with eliminating the remnants of colonialism, and in particular the seizure of white farmers' land?

The first answer is that I for one — and I believe this is true for most other critics — am not going out of my way to single out Zimbabwe. The crisis group is an equal opportunity critic of any government pursuing destructive and potentially conflict-generating policies towards its own people, whether that be in Europe, Asia, the Americas or Africa.

We have produced 15 reports on Zimbabwe since we started writing about it in 2000, but also in that time about 430 reports and briefings on other problems elsewhere in the world. The question is not why humanitarian compassion and conflict-prevention concern should extend to Zimbabwe — but rather why they should stop at its borders.

The second answer is that there is absolutely no reason to suppose that the Mugabe government's actions have hurt whites more than blacks. On the contrary. The land seizures displaced or made jobless hundreds of thousands of black farm workers. And as much as Mugabe would like to keep talking about UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and white commercial farmers, Zimbabwe's problems run far deeper than the land issue.

We have seen the effective destruction of an entire country in a handful of years. What was once a regional breadbasket is now a basket case, relying on international food aid. What was once a functioning democracy with respect for the rule of law is now a repressive regime where the courts verge on farce and the police have been reduced to a politicised gang willing to torture political opponents. And those who have suffered from all this have been overwhelmingly black.

The crisis has long stopped being about liberation, decolonisation, and rectifying historical injustices. Operation Murambatsvina, directed against poor and black citizens, is the clearest evidence anyone could want. Ask not me, but the hundreds of thousands of its victims, all black, who now have no homes and no livelihoods because of this terrifyingly authoritarian "clean-up".

It is perfectly true that the most effective pressure for change in Zimbabwe will not be from western sanctions, although it is important that those affecting the country's leaders, not its people, be sustained. Some of it will come from within, if the country's civil society is given the freedom to fully express itself, and some material support from outside. But overwhelmingly the pressure must come from African diplomacy — quiet if need be, but of the strong rather than limp variety, and sharply focused on achieving an effective transition.

That diplomacy must come from SA, still by far the most influential player in resolving Zimbabwe's crisis, from the Southern African Development Community and from the African Union (AU).

One of the most useful initiatives that could now be taken would be for the AU's Peace and Security Council, with the support of other African institutions, to establish a mission of distinguished former African presidents to explore with Mugabe, Zanu (PF), the Movement for Democratic Change and other political forces in Zimbabwe a political transition strategy. The details would be for that group to work out, but it might involve a dignified withdrawal by Mugabe from an active political role, creation of a credible government of national unity, a period for new or revised political groupings to form and, ultimately, properly internationally supervised elections.

There is no longer any excuse for inaction or indifference in relation to Zimbabwe. Its people's misery is too acute, and the credibility of the continent's response capacity too much on the line.

It is time for Africa to take ownership of and solve this problem — and make it possible for critics like me to shut up.

|| Evans, former foreign minister of Australia, is president of the International Crisis Group, whose latest report on Zimbabwe is at [www.crisis](http://www.crisis)

