

## **Mugabe urges peace as Zimbabwe prepares for elections**

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Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe on Monday called for an end to violence in the country, ahead of a planned referendum on a new constitution and general elections.

"We don't want any more violence and bloodshed. We want peace and unity," Mugabe said at a war commemoration event near the capital Harare.

"I urge all Zimbabweans to desist from engaging in violent campaigns during elections. Let us fully embrace peaceful, tolerance and non-violent electioneering before, during and after the contest," he said.

The speech came ahead of a visit by South African President Jacob Zuma to Harare on Wednesday. Zuma is the chief negotiator on Zimbabwe's political crisis for the Southern African Development Community.

The regional bloc is set to meet at the weekend.

Every election in the southern African nation since 2000 has been marred by violence or intimidation.

During the 2008 poll, dozens of opposition members were reported to have been killed after Mugabe lost the first round vote.

Mugabe's Zanu-PF party and the two factions of the former opposition Movement for Democratic Change have been in a shaky coalition since 2009.

Mugabe, 88, has been at the helm of the country since independence in 1980.

Speaking at an event honouring fallen fighters from the guerrilla war against colonialism and white minority rule, Mugabe raised a fist and said that violence had been meant to oust the previous regime.

"But we knocked them out. Now it shouldn't be used against our own people. There should not be violence," he said.

The president stood by his policy from more than a decade ago that saw white farmers ousted from their lands, in a move criticised internationally.

He warned black land owners about renting to dispossessed white farmers.

"Those working in cahoots with white farmers must know we are watching them.

"We will not tolerate people subletting their land and sharing the profits with whites," he said.

Critics say the land ownership policy has mainly benefited Mugabe's allies while hurting the country's agricultural production.

There is concern that the elections, for which no date has been set, could be marred by intimidation and abuse, particularly at the hands of security forces, with army chiefs this year declaring their allegiance to Zanu-PF.

It remains unclear if Mugabe's party will support a draft constitution that has been written after several years of negotiations.

After several postponements, the constitutional referendum remains set for this year.

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