

Zimbabwe Court Frees Opposition Leader on Bail
Fri June 20, 2003 03:31 PM ET

By Stella Mapenzauswa

HARARE, Zimbabwe (Reuters) - Zimbabwe's high court freed opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai on bail Friday, two weeks after his arrest on charges he sought to spark a revolt against President Robert Mugabe.

Tsvangirai, who leads the main opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), was arrested on June 6 after a week of mass street protests led by the MDC that the government described as an attempted coup d'etat.

Overruling government objections, High Court Justice Susan Mavangira approved bail of 10 million Zimbabwe dollars -- about \$5,500 at black market rates -- and required the MDC to post a further payment of 100 million Zimbabwe dollars to secure Tsvangirai's freedom.

As a further condition of his release, the veteran trade union leader will be barred from making any statements which could be construed as advocating the violent or unconstitutional removal of Mugabe or his government.

Defense lawyer Innocent Chagonda told Reuters that Tsvangirai had paid up and returned home, ending almost two weeks spent in a Harare jail cell.

State lawyers had argued against bail, arguing that the MDC leader was likely to use his liberty to renew calls for a "final push" against Mugabe.

But Mavangira said the state had not made its case, drawing smiles and murmured congratulations in a courtroom filled with opposition supporters.

TREASON CHARGES

Tsvangirai was not present when the decision was reached. He was appearing in another courtroom for a hearing in a separate treason trial, where he is accused of plotting to kill Mugabe.

MDC spokesman Paul Themba Nyathi welcomed Tsvangirai's release, saying Mugabe's government had locked the party leader up "in a crowded and filthy prison to try to humiliate him."

"The authorities deliberately set out to try and dehumanize and humiliate President Tsvangirai in the eyes of the people. They failed," Themba Nyathi said in a statement.

Upon his release, Tsvangirai was greeted by a small group of cheering supporters.

He now faces trial on two separate treason charges, either of which could bring a possible death sentence.

His arrest earlier this month came as Zimbabwe grapples with its worst economic and political crisis since independence from Britain in 1980, struggling with chronic food and fuel shortages and inflation riding at 300 percent.

The MDC says Mugabe has mismanaged the economy, in part by condoning the seizure of white-owned farms to give to landless blacks, and has stepped up political repression following his victory in a 2002 election that both the MDC and several Western nations say was rigged.

Mugabe dismisses the MDC as a stooge of Western governments opposed to his land reform program, and says Zimbabwe is being undermined by both domestic and foreign enemies.