

## Commonwealth suspension questioned

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A row is brewing over the continued suspension of President Robert Mugabe's government

JOHANNESBURG, 24 Mar 2003 (IRIN) - A row is brewing over Commonwealth secretary-general Don McKinnon's announcement last Sunday that Zimbabwe's suspension from the 54-member body would remain in place until December.

McKinnon's announcement was a turnaround on previous reports that South African President Thabo Mbeki and Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo felt that positive changes in the country made Zimbabwe's continued suspension unnecessary. Those views were opposed by Australian Prime Minister John Howard, the third member of the "troika" mandated to deal with the Zimbabwe case.

Several days before the 19 March expiry of Zimbabwe's one-year suspension, McKinnon issued a statement saying that members of the troika agreed that he should undertake wider consultations among Commonwealth governments. McKinnon said the consensus was the matter would be reviewed at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Nigeria in December 2003, and the suspension should remain in place until then.

However, South Africa's high commissioner to the United Kingdom, Lindiwe Mabuza, has challenged that position. In a statement released last week, she said that neither the Commonwealth chair nor the secretary-general have a mandate to extend the suspension, and it was at variance with the public positions of a "substantial number of Commonwealth governments".

She said that Commonwealth leaders at the recent Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Kuala Lumpur, unanimously endorsed the NAM conference decision criticising the imposition of sanctions on Zimbabwe.

In addition, 10 Commonwealth leaders at a Southern African Development Community ministerial meeting in Luanda, reaffirmed the NAM decision.

"In other words, the ministers articulated a view on Zimbabwe also held by the two African members of the troika", Mabuza said.

"It is thus important for us all to know precisely which countries were consulted and what positions they communicated to the secretary-general," she added.

Mabuza said that it was a long-standing Commonwealth tradition and practice to take decisions by consensus, as was the original decision to suspend Zimbabwe.

McKinnon's statement that the members of the troika concluded that the most appropriate approach was for the suspension to remain in place "does not represent the view of the troika", Mabuza said.

In response, Commonwealth spokesman Joel Kibazo told IRIN that McKinnon's consultation of other leaders came at the request of a divided troika.

"He [McKinnon] canvassed the opinion of those leaders and does not have their permission to go back and reveal their position. He reported what the general view was and those people who took that position know who they are," he said.

"He found that some were in favour of stronger measures and some in favour of weaker measures. But the generally held broad view was to keep sanctions until they could all meet to discuss it. He told the troika what his findings were and they agreed," Kibazo said.

The decision to suspend Zimbabwe came after the Commonwealth expressed concern over the violence surrounding last year's presidential elections, which it deemed neither free nor fair.