

June 26, 2003

South Africa Faces Test as Zimbabwe Deteriorates

By LYDIA POLGREEN

JOHANNESBURG, June 25 — Each day brings a fresh sign of misery in Zimbabwe. Yet South Africa, Zimbabwe's prosperous and stable neighbor to the south, has done little to defuse the situation despite having the most to lose if Zimbabwe descends into chaos.

Last week President Robert Mugabe's government decreed it a crime to carry large wads of cash — a bid to control the hoarding of money in a country where the inflation rate has reached 300 percent. This week the government outlawed carrying gasoline in containers as the supply of fuel dwindles.

Mr. Mugabe's violent program of land reform has taken a toll on the country's ability to feed itself. This month the World Food Program announced that 5.5 million people in Zimbabwe will need extra food in order to avoid starvation. Opposition leaders who just last year ran for office are now being jailed.

In an Op-Ed article published on Tuesday in The New York Times condemning Mr. Mugabe's increasingly autocratic rule, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell urged South Africa to take a more active role in brokering a deal to end Mr. Mugabe's 23-year rule of Zimbabwe. But if its recent actions toward Zimbabwe — or lack thereof — are any guide, Pretoria is unlikely to intervene in any significant way in the looming crisis.

South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, has staked his legacy on bringing Africa fully into the global community, seeking to build prosperity across the continent through free market democracy with a distinctly African flavor. Yet he has done little to press Mr. Mugabe — one Africa's longest-serving heads of state — to follow those policies. Since a visit to Harare in May failed to produce a solution, Mr. Mbeki has been largely silent, engaging in quiet and polite diplomacy, predicting a solution to the crisis will somehow emerge within a year.

A complex array of domestic and foreign concerns explain Mr. Mbeki's reluctance to confront a man much of the rest of the world condemns as a tyrant, political experts here and in Zimbabwe said. Fundamentally, Mr. Mbeki seems unable to decide just what South Africa's role in the region should be.

"Our policy makers need to decide if our role is to be hegemonic in order to stabilize the region, or if we want to be just one player," said Adam Habib, a professor of politics at the University of Natal. "I think Mbeki swings from one pole to the other, hence his unwillingness to confront Mugabe head on."

At home, Mr. Mbeki faces his own land reform issues — much of the nation's best land is still owned by a tiny, wealthy white minority, and Mr. Mbeki has pledged to come up with a plan to distribute land more equitably. As an ardent advocate of free markets, Mr. Mbeki would never condone Mr. Mugabe's radical and violent land reform program, but he is under considerable pressure from his own party, the African National Congress, to take action. His refusal to bow to Western pressure and condemn Mr. Mugabe, who many here still consider a hero, plays well with that crowd, Mr. Habib said.

A spokesman for South Africa's Foreign Ministry said that Mr. Mbeki is doing precisely what Mr. Powell asks: trying to help Zimbabwe find a solution.

"The solution to the current challenge in Zimbabwe lies with the people of Zimbabwe," said Ronnie Mamoepa, the spokesman. "There are well-known, ongoing efforts by the regional leadership to assist the people of Zimbabwe to begin to address the challenges that face them with a view to national reconciliation."

Among Zimbabwe's governing party, reaction to Mr. Powell's statements was swift and blunt.

"It is quite inadvisable for Powell to tell us who will rule Zimbabwe," said George Charamba, Mr. Mugabe's chief spokesman. "It is not his business."

He said that Mr. Powell's comments "told all oppressed people of the African continent that whatever their aspirations they will be criminalized by the American administration."

This has been Mr. Mugabe's message all along, and his ultimate weapon against Mr. Mbeki: anyone who questions his legitimacy is an imperialist who would give Zimbabwe back to its colonial masters. John Stremlau, a professor of international relations at University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, said Mr. Mbeki, mindful of the power of such claims, has quietly sought a solution to the crisis that would both preserve Mr. Mugabe's dignity and legacy while effecting a change in leadership.

"One thing Thabo Mbeki does not want to do is let this crisis divide his own country," Mr. Stremlau said. "He has managed this crisis with an eye to his own constituency. It is very easy to carp about it from Washington, but it is very different when you are dealing with a powerful and important neighbor."

[Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company](#)