

June 28, 2003

Zimbabwean Urges U.S. to Act Cautiously Against Mugabe

By LYDIA POLGREEN

JOHANNESBURG, June 27 — Seizing on President Bush's call for a change in leadership in Zimbabwe, the opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai said today that his Movement for Democratic Change was developing a plan it hoped would lead to a peaceful transition of power in a country rocked by political and economic strife.

But Mr. Tsvangirai also said the United States should not overreach in southern Africa as it pressures President Robert Mugabe to step down. Rather, he said, "there must be a balance in how outside pressure can be applied in order to bring results," an apparent acknowledgment that Mr. Tsvangirai's party remains vulnerable to Mr. Mugabe's charge that it is simply a puppet of Britain and the United States.

"These are very delicate issues," Mr. Tsvangirai said in a telephone interview from his home in the suburbs of Harare, Zimbabwe's capital. "We have specific suggestions on how outside pressure can help." He said the opposition's leadership planned to meet over the weekend to come up with a plan to end the crisis, one that will include a call for new elections, something Mr. Mugabe's ruling Zanu-PF party has rejected.

Mr. Tsvangirai's cautious embrace of Mr. Bush's call for change in Zimbabwe underscores just how difficult it will be to resolve the crisis there. It demonstrates why leaders in the region, including South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, have been reluctant to press Mr. Mugabe to step down despite general agreement that his departure from office after 23 years would be best for Zimbabwe and its neighbors.

"The real situation is far more intricate and complicated than people realize," said Chris Landsberg, a political analyst and lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand here. "I don't think it is as easy for South Africa to move on Zimbabwe as people make it out to be."

Mr. Mugabe has cast his struggle to retain power as a battle between African liberation and neo-colonial power, a strategy that has made it difficult for other African leaders to urge him publicly to step aside.

In an Op-Ed article in The New York Times on Tuesday, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell urged Zimbabwe's neighbors — South Africa in particular — to take a more active role in defusing the crisis.

But experts here say Mr. Mbeki is reluctant to push Mr. Mugabe because bowing to Western pressure to shun him would cost Mr. Mbeki politically at home and diminish his standing among African leaders. Still, political analysts here expect that Mr. Bush will press Mr. Mbeki to act in Zimbabwe when the two meet in Pretoria next month.

Once an economic powerhouse in southern Africa, Zimbabwe has descended into political and economic turmoil since last year's presidential election, won by Mr. Mugabe. Marked by widespread fraud, the election was not recognized by the United States and Europe.

With his popularity waning, Mr. Mugabe has carried out an often violent program of land reform in which black squatters have taken land by force from white farmers. The country's agricultural output, once among the highest in Africa, has plummeted by 50 percent. Inflation is rampant at supermarkets in Harare, where cashiers weigh fat bundles of Zimbabwean dollars rather than count them because the currency's value has fallen so low.

Mr. Tsvangirai, who won more than a million votes in the election last year, has twice been charged with treason and was jailed for two weeks after a recent series of mass protests in Harare and Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city.

Mr. Tsvangirai said that his party was ready for unconditional talks with the ruling Zanu-PF but that a new election was the only way out of the current morass.

"The question is really the restoration of legitimacy of the government," he said. "It can only be restored by the free mandate of the people of Zimbabwe."

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