

Close encounter with Zimbabwe's secret police

By Justin Pearce

BBC News website, Zimbabwe

In the latest part of his series, Justin Pearce reflects on the hardships of life in Zimbabwe - for those delivering aid and for journalists trying to find out what is going on.

Delivering food aid is not a crime in Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, I saw a priest interrogated by the secret police for that very reason.

Legal or illegal, delivering food aid in Zimbabwe is certainly a slow business, mostly because no one knows where exactly the needy people are.

I had spent the best part of 24 hours rumbling around the dirt roads of rural Matabeleland in a truck laden with maize meal and blankets - intended for some of the people who have been dumped in the countryside after government knocked down the homes of 500,000 people.

Whenever we saw someone on the road, the priest and the driver who were delivering the food asked if they knew of any displaced people in the area.

When we stopped at a cluster of shops by the main road, the priest got out to ask the same question once again.

Lucky

He seemed to be spending a long time in conversation with one man in a smart white shirt. I asked the truck driver what was going on.

"The pastor is under arrest," the driver explained. "That gentleman is from the CIO."

Who was that black guy you were talking to?

Tourist tout

The CIO is the Central Intelligence Organisation: Zimbabwe's secret police.

In this case, the pastor was lucky that he managed to talk his way out of the situation.

And since unauthorised journalism in Zimbabwe carries a 20-year prison sentence, I suppose I too was lucky that the CIO man didn't see me behind the driver's seat.

From the day I arrived in Zimbabwe, I had been frightened - not because of anything I had seen or experienced, but because of the fear I had sensed in other people.

Second-hand fear

I felt it in the way that no one wanted to be photographed, or to give their name when interviewed, or even be seen in public with me when I was carrying a camera.

(This explains why the photos accompanying my articles over the past week include so many silhouetted faces.)

I felt that same second-hand fear when I went to interview a Zimbabwean aid official - and saw him keep his door shut during the interview, and lie to his colleagues about the purpose of my visit, lest the wrong person get wind of the fact that there was a journalist on the premises.

I felt it in the way that some people would have incredibly cryptic conversations by phone or e-mail - while others said what they liked, realising that if you were going to succumb to the fear you'd never communicate at all.

The problem was, you never knew whether the CIO would be listening in or not.

I felt the fear in the way I was unable to go and interview people at the Hopley Farm resettlement area - and when some of them came to talk to me in a secret location, they told me how even prayer meetings there are broken up by the police.

Flight booked

I felt it after I had lunch with a contact in the resort town of Victoria Falls - and afterwards, one of the touts who hang around the tourist shops demanded to know: "Who was that black guy you were talking to?"

Perhaps he thought my friend was a freelance tour guide who had ventured onto his own turf - or perhaps he was motivated by something other than commercial rivalry. The uncertainty made the experience even more unnerving.

So I was almost grateful for that near miss with the security police in the bush of Matabeleland.

After 10 days of being infected by other people's fear, at last I could see, just the other side of the truck's windscreen, the kind of thing that people were frightened of.

And I, of course, had the luxury of being booked on a flight out of the country the next day.

Do you have any questions for Justin Pearce about his reporting trip to Zimbabwe? Use the form to send your comments.

Name

Your E-mail address

Town & Country

Comments

Thanks for your questions and comments, which appear below with Justin Pearce's responses. To those of you who expressed appreciation for the BBC's coverage: we won't publish your comments here, but we'd like to thank you for them.

It's interesting reading the comments from people who don't live in Zim trying to defend the indefensible. The past five years have seen this country rapidly deteriorate... it's a miracle there is still peace! Shortages of basics, spiralling poverty and h.i.v have torn the country to pieces. The politicians hang on to power and they have become tyrannical by the day. We don't eat sovereignty nor do we get full on idle unproductive land. Land was just used as an excuse!

themba zigama, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

i enjoy reading BBC articles on Africa especially the coverage on Zimbabwe. I am Zimbabwean and proud. I agree with your comments concerning the situation in my country. To me it seems that anything bad going on in my country is worth reporting and you forget about the positive things about Zimbabwe, its tourist attractions, its culture, traditional music etc. When things were really fine out here, Zimbabwe never got so much coverage as it is receiving now. Thus, the BBC only seeks to paint a negative picture about Zimbabwe and Africa as a whole. Why is it that you always report about poverty, corruption war, famine etc and turn a blind eye on the positive that Africa is made of. I know we have our problems that need to be attended to, but some of these problems are made worse by your selective reporting which scare away tourists and investors. The role of the media is to expose the human rights abuses by the government and also to provide the way forward rather than just tell us about it! The demolitions in Zimbabwe and then what? We need balanced news. Don't make people view Africa as uncivilised and an unsafe place to visit. As a matter of fact, with all its problems, Zimbabwe is still a safe tourist destination with loving people. Believe it or not!

charumbira shumba, kariba, zimbabwe

JP: A very valid point - on the matter of media coverage, you seem to be making essentially the same point as Anthony Motton, so you can scroll down the page and read my reaction to what he said. On tourism, I can confirm to any would-be visitors that Zimbabwe is a safe and enjoyable place to visit - though fuel shortages could be a problem if you plan to drive. In Victoria Falls I found it particularly sad that those tourists who go there now are mostly staying in the big international hotels and not patronising local businesses.

Justin, do you believe that the Z.A.N.U.-P.F. regime of Robert Mugabe will be overthrown anytime soon?

Aidan Work, Wellington, New Zealand.

JP: Honestly I don't. While there is a lot of discontentment with the way things are, and some people working for change, the repressive climate makes it difficult to see any change of government in the near future.

It is very evil of Justin and the BBC to try and destroy Zimbabwe, simply because Zimbabwe is implementing its much-needed land reform. I hate the way Justin pretends to know Zimbabwe when in fact the goal of his illegal visit was to write rubbish in the first place. Why not let the process of democracy in Zimbabwe take place? The UK gov't is just too intrusive about Zimbabwe, as a result the neighboring countries are beginning to hate the Brits. You are very autocratic and undemocratic when anyone goes against your interests, even with a valid issue such as land. What a shame that the discussion is focused so much on foreigners and not Zimbabwean participation. You have a lot of Zimbabweans in UK and the USA. How about Zimbabweans in Zimbabwe (majority) who you are ignoring in this discussion. I sympathize with Zimbabweans!

Larry Phiri, Malawian / USA

JP: Are demolitions and forced removals what you would consider "land reform" and "the process of democracy"? I beg to differ. There was no mention of foreigners in my reporting - unless you mean those Zimbabweans who have been arbitrarily deprived of their citizenship. What I have written reflects the views of Zimbabweans who told me their stories. Destroy Zimbabwe? I certainly witnessed a lot of destruction, and neither I nor the BBC was responsible for it.

Justin, as a Zimbabwean I find your many general answers and responses "self-serving". Reading your responses one gets the impression, that nothing is good about Zimbabwe. That no one should go there, no one should send aid in any form because it will go to Robert Mugabe and that because of land reform, everything has fallen apart. You are very good and evasive on your country Britain's opposition to land reform that affects white "Britons" in Zimbabwe. You fail to see why a lot of Africans in the region, are actually very suspicious about stories on Zimbabwe from a white Briton like yourself. In the end you are preventing other westerners from going to Zimbabwe to visit, learn Zimbabwean culture or interact with Zimbabweans. Your answers are written as if you have all the answers to Zimbabwe's problems. In your responses you fail to mention that a lot of African and western countries have moved people before. I DEEPLY RESENT YOUR STORIES ABOUT ZIMBABWE THAT SEEKS

TO INFLUENCE, NOT TO INFORM PEOPLE ABOUT ZIMBABWE. I'M AFRAID YOU ARE THE WRONG MESSENGER AND YOU NEED TO BE STOPPED?

Mombuza, Zimbabwean / USA

For the record, I'm not actually British, but that's a trivial point. Everything I learnt about Zimbabwe came from conversations with Zimbabweans who live in Zimbabwe. Sure, a lot of other countries - particularly apartheid South Africa - have practised forced removals, but that does not mean it is morally justifiable.

Africa is and always will be the forgotten continent. It is ironic that what Mugabe fought against, racism, and extremism is now what he is doing. What goes around comes around I suppose.

Paul Arthur, Essen Germany

JP: Interesting point. What struck me about what I saw in Zimbabwe was how much it resembled the actions of the apartheid government in South Africa which also, you may remember, had a policy of demolishing the homes of "unwanted" people in the cities, and moving them to rural "homelands".

what do you think threatens Mugabe so much that he acts as if that he is a COMMUNIST? do you think that his cabinet loves his ideas or they are just afraid of him?

thabo moletsane, durban. south africa

JP: There are reports that some within Mr Mugabe's government are not happy with the way things are going. Maybe some feel they can try and change the system from within, or others may just be enjoying the benefits of power.

I read your story about the demolitions in Zim. And while I am very disturbed with the current situation in Zimbabwe. I have a question for you. How would you rate the BBC coverage of Zim? I mean would you say that it is unbiased and fair? You see, I feel that your/BBC's negative coverage of Zim only adds to human suffering in the country because it creates the illusion that Zim is a failed state which in turn scares off investors. I've never traveled to Zim but I do have friends who live in the country. And while they are upset by the current situation life goes on, they live and enjoy life. I would love for you to do a story on what life is not only for poor Zimbabweans but for wealthy people AND the white minority outside of commercial farming. If you really care about the situation in Zim, please write about something positive. Here are some ideas: 1. current government projects to improve the current economic environment 2. the affluent white community in the country 3. the influx of Asians and how they are adapting, anything positive and upbeat. It's very important Justin, and the FAIR thing to do. BTW, I am an American with zero ties to Zim other than the fact that I have a few white friends there who LOVE Zim and report that life is difficult at times, but beautiful. In the name of fairness Justin write about their view, write about what life is really like without all the hype...thanks!

Anthony Motton, USA

JP: Interesting point, Anthony. It goes to the heart of debates about what news is. I think it's the nature of news reporting that it emphasises moments of crisis. And I believe that as a reporter, one has a particular duty to expose abuses of human rights and to communicate the stories of those who are in need. On 11 September 2001 the eyes of the media were on New York and Washington; on 7 July 2005 they were on London. I agree there is a need for other kinds of stories too - but given the scale and the extremity of the crisis in Zimbabwe, and the fact that circumstances allowed me only a short visit, I feel that I spent my time there doing what was most urgent and most necessary.

Why devote so many articles on Zimbabwe poverty and not of Sudan or Mali or Niger?? please comment on these issues. I personally find little credibility about articles on Zimbabwe, especially from the Brits!!!

Zodwa Mbozu, Zimbabwean / USA

JP: I already answered a similar question to this one, but to reiterate: I don't believe Zimbabwe is unique, and I can safely say that other colleagues at the BBC take the same view. There has been extensive coverage of Niger, to give one example, on the BBC recently. On the other hand, Zimbabwe is facing a particular crisis at the moment, following the destruction of homes, which could so easily have been avoided - for this reason alone, it warrants our attention.

Until the BBC reports a more balanced view of the situation in Zimbabwe, blacks throughout the world will continue to suspect it is because of Mugabe's land reform. As a black American, I honestly see no wrong in redistribution of land to poor Zimbabweans. I am not a supporter of Mugabe but I do suspect that your news is very biased. I enjoy reading about the continent of Africa on the BBC but I wish your articles were more balanced.

carlos crockett, United States

JP: But our latest series of articles was about how the government has been destroying the homes of poor Zimbabweans, and trucking them away from the land where they have lived for years. Do you believe that is wrong? I certainly do.

What are the benefits for the supporters of the regime like the CIO? Surely they realize the damage, that they are effectively contributing to, that is being done to the country.

Johan Ebersohn, Valencia - Spain

JP: The CIO is a government institution, staffed by people doing their jobs and being paid salaries. I guess it's the same in any system - you will always have people earning salaries from the government whether as civil servants, police or whatever - some may support the regime, others not.

Why is the government of Zimbabwe not asking for international help? Finally do you think democratic changes will happen soon enough to allow freedom of press?

Josephat Mua, Silver Spring, Maryland, USA

JP: Zimbabwe is currently accepting donor aid from the World Food Programme and others. In the present situation, I find it hard to predict where or how change will happen.

Do you think it's time that the UN got off their butts and start getting serious about doing something about this country.

frank doucette, sudbury ontario canada

JP: Remember that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan recently sent a special envoy, Anna Tibaijuka, to Zimbabwe. Her report was highly critical of the recent actions of the government.

I wonder when these bad comments about Zimbabwe will stop. Simply because of his land reform, you are bent on destroying the country. At least the country belongs to black and not white. When you destroy the whole continent with your biased comments and judgement, and have nothing to talk about again you will relax.

Akadiri Oluwole, Bangkok, Thailand

JP: The BBC is certainly not bent on destroying Zimbabwe, and our latest series of articles was not about land reform - it was about the destruction of the homes and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of poor black Zimbabweans. Our "bad comments" will stop when the abuse of human rights stops.

Based upon your recent experiences, do you believe it is "safe" for Americans to travel and reside in Zimbabwe? I've been twice before (2001 and 2004) and fell in love with Shona culture, particularly the mbira music. I would very much like to return in November, to visit friends and continue my study of Shona mbira music, that is, if it is safe to do so.

Lewis Peterman, Ph.D, San Diego, USA

JP: There's certainly a substantial number of foreign citizens living in Zimbabwe without problems. Those I spoke to are very careful about not saying or doing anything that could be interpreted as political, because that's when the problems start.

I am joining your series late (reading your segment on the close encounter with the CIO). I was wondering if you could explain to me why such an organisation exists (or more specifically the secret police affiliated with the intelligence organisation), and why so many feel frightened? How do the secret police and the fears associated tie in to the food shortages of Zimbabwe and the rest of W. Africa?

Andy Fraser, Corvallis, Oregon, USA

JP: As in any country - a secret police force exists as a means of political control, trying to stop dissatisfaction with the status quo from being expressed as political dissent. The food shortages in Zimbabwe are linked to the government's recent destruction of homes and relocation of people. For this reason, I think, the government is seeing anyone doing charitable work as a political subversive.

Zimbabwe is in Southern Africa, so I wouldn't want to try and generalise about the food and political situation in West Africa.

Were there many tourists in Victoria Falls? Do the shops have supplies? Can one buy fuel for cars etc. How was the Pastor able to get fuel for his truck? From Zambia? or? Thank you

Trevor Heath, Port Orchard, Washington, USA

JP: There weren't many tourists at Victoria Falls - only a fraction of the number I saw on my previous visit 10 years ago. Yet local people say the numbers have actually increased since the tourist industry hit rock bottom two or three years ago. At first glance shops look well-stocked - then you realise that the most basic items - flour, bread, cooking oil, soap, washing powder - are often unavailable.

There are severe fuel shortages. Those who live in towns close to the border will often cross into Zambia or Botswana to fill up. Otherwise, fuel trades at inflated prices on the black market. And recently, the government introduced petrol stations that only accept foreign currency. If you're one of the lucky few with access to forex, you can fill up easily.

How do we get rid of this Mugabe problem? Is it the paper tiger which every Mobutu-esque kleptocracy is, or does Mugabe veil his corruption more skilfully? Certainly he is not the charmer that Mobutu tried to be, so he'd have to hide it more, right?

Oliver Serafini, Lake Forest, Illinois, USA

JP: There are a number of important differences between the Mobutu regime in the former Zaire and the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe. One, Mobutu's legendary kleptocracy could happen only because of his country's enormous

mineral wealth. Zimbabwe has some mineral wealth, but not on the same scale. Two, in the context of the Cold War, the west was prepared to forgive almost anything from a leader who, like Mobutu, was anti-communist. By contrast, the western countries have been vocal in their condemnation of Mr Mugabe.

I would like to ask Justin Pearce what advice can he give to Journalists who want or plan to visit Zimbabwe in the near future. It is almost three to four years since the Zimbabwean authorities suspended movements of Journalists to its country. Due to Justin Pearce's recent trip to Zimbabwe, so my question is Zimbabwe has become a safe for Journalists to travel there freely?

Peter Tuach, Mankato, Minnesota, USA

JP: Since the BBC is specifically banned from Zimbabwe, I went there unofficially. Foreign journalists are allowed into Zimbabwe if they can get the permission of the Information Ministry. I recently spoke to a TV team who'd been there with permission - each member of the crew had to pay US\$600 for accreditation for the short trip, and they were accompanied by government minders who kept an eye on what they were doing. So I wouldn't say journalists can travel freely.

Why doesn't Nelson Mandela do or say anything about what's happening?

Gary, London

JP: Gary, obviously I can't speak on Mr Mandela's behalf - other than to suggest it could be because he's an elderly retired man who no longer plays any formal role in politics. He did once drop a strong hint about his feeling on Zimbabwe when he spoke in 2001 of liberation leaders who "despise the people who put them in power and want to stay in power forever".

What are education and social services like? Are there such things? I hear that all the "schools" are going to be Mugabe-ized, I mean nationalized, just like everything else, Are they actually producing anything on the farms, other than subsistence crops? Are the mines functioning? And what about communications, phones, internet, etc, and electricity and running water? I know fuel and spares are just about nonexistent.

P. Wright, Ciudad del Este, Paraguay, South America

JP: Zimbabwe established an excellent school and health system in the 1980s. It was hit hard in the 1990s after the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme imposed by the IMF forced Zimbabwe to cut spending on these services. Now of course, clinics have been destroyed in the "clean-up" and forced removals have children far from the schools they once attended.

Food production has been badly hit by drought. Although I didn't visit any commercial farming areas, I was told that the way the land redistribution was conducted - land given to people who didn't have the capital or the agricultural skills to farm it - has led to a big drop in production.

Some mining continues. The phone network is just about functioning, but it takes time to get through. In most places, you can expect the electricity to be switched off for a few hours each day. Bulawayo has a big problem with water at the moment - I saw long queues of people waiting for water to be delivered by truck. And fuel is a nationwide problem. Filling stations all over the country have long queues of cars parked, waiting for when the petrol or diesel arrives.

About one year ago, there was a plane caught in Harare, carrying what they said were mercenaries to make a Coup d'Etat in Equatorial Guinea. Some newspaper published that Mr. Mugabe declared to Zimbabwean Parliament that Obiang Nguema (Equatorial Guinea's president) would give Zimbabwe oil "for free", in return for sending these mercenaries to Equatorial Guinea. Is there any oil supply for Zimbabwe under these terms now? Were the mercenaries sent to EG?

Malila Muñoz, Mexico City, Mexico.

JP: That newspaper seems to have been incorrect. The men who were convicted in a Zimbabwean court of mercenary activities were in fact on their way to stage a coup against Obiang Nguema, not to support him. The men were mostly South African citizens of Angolan origin. They did not come from Zimbabwe, but were arrested when their plane landed in Harare, apparently on the way to Equatorial Guinea.

so were u not attacked there because i heard that journalists are also being beaten and arrested

mabanya, Alice South Africa

JP: I kept out of trouble by keeping a low profile. But Zimbabwean journalists do indeed operate at a severe risk of violence or arrest.

Justin....It would seem as if the CIA were the "frightened" ones! Exactly what are they looking for....guarding against...etc...I seem to be missing something about the politics over there. And what's the real reason they have displaced over a half million people??

William J. Flosi, Chicago...USA

JP: A complicated question - have a look through the various articles published over the past week. Briefly, most of the displaced people felt they were targeted because city voters have voted mostly for the opposition in recent elections.

Given the present interventionist policies of the USA and the UK governments can you suggest any reason why they permit the Zimbabwean regime to continue in power?

Morgan, Vancouver, Canada

Given that the developed world has no interest in attacking Zimbabwe in the same fashion that we did Iraq....and that the people have every motivation to overthrow the government but not the ability, what will be necessary for the regime change that we all want?

Roger Brown, Treforest, Wales

I don't know why I'm drawn to stories emanating from Zimbabwe, however, what if anything is the international community (this of course includes African Nations, especially South Africa) doing about the virtual stranglehold Robert Mugabe has on this country? I read somewhere that the South African government was planning to give Zimbabwe a loan. Even in the face of all the atrocities in the country.

Shon Adams, Roadtown, Tortola, BVI

JP: In response to all these questions: I can't comment on the foreign policy decisions of western powers. Remember though, that Tony Blair in particular has been quite vocal in his condemnation of President Mugabe - remember too that Zimbabwe is not unique in the world. There are plenty of other examples of bad governance to which the western powers pay virtually no attention at all. African countries have indeed been slow to criticise the actions of the Zimbabwean government. There has been some talk that the South African loan, if it happens, will come with conditions attached, in order to put pressure on Zimbabwe to change - but nothing is certain yet.

What will happen to the 500,000 people who are now homeless? And, are there any plans by the U.N. to rid Zimbabwe of Robert Mugabe?

Karin O'Brien, Johnson City, Tennessee USA

Any insight of what is going to happen next with issue of accommodation in Zimbabwe since they have nowhere to stay.

Lex, Bath

JP: Karin and Lex: The homeless are in very difficult circumstances indeed. The government has begun building new houses, but only a fraction of the number required. Given the current economic crisis, it's hard to see how they could house 500,000 people, given the best will in the world. Some people are still out in the open, others are crammed in with relatives in towns or villages. And no, Karin, there are no plans by the UN to depose Mr Mugabe.

Thank you for giving those of us outside of Zimbabwe an idea of what is happening there. All the data coming out from organisations like the World Food Programme points towards the likelihood of there being a very serious famine developing in Southern Africa, did you see evidence of this in Zimbabwe and if so to what extent?

Josh, Oxford

JP: Sadly, yes. I didn't spend enough time in the countryside to get a comprehensive picture. But I saw plenty of examples of city people, who were self-sufficient until their small businesses were destroyed, being dumped in villages that are already struggling with food because of the drought. Those villages now have to deal with new mouths to feed. People are already depending on hand-outs by the churches.

Why is it you are constantly trying to portray Zimbabwe in a bad light despite the fact that throughout this whole continent there are worse leaders. Starvation is currently occurring in Niger, Uganda...etc. We have a criminal government in Uganda, interfering with the constitution, carrying out atrocities in the North Gulu if you have not heard of this but we never seem to hear as much about these issues. Is this because you are trying to divert our attention from the main facts of why your organisation is in support of certain African regimes.

Robert Novota, London England

JP: I agree with you Zimbabwe is not unique. We've had a lot of reports on Zimbabwe this week because they came out of an intensive short trip to that country - but my colleagues and I will do our best to bring all the repressive regimes on the continent under similar scrutiny.

My dearest journalist I think that this climate of fear really doesn't exist because I think there are the Zimbabweans that wish to impress you and no other. They think that if you are afraid you can sympathize with them and it's more easy for them to ask some favour or ask for some benefit. I am a poor Italian resident in Epworth (the only white who lives there), now I enjoy my holidays in our rightfully country, from around ten years. I am used joking bad joke (political) in the road or at the restaurant or bar freely and some Zimbabweans they said that one day I will be arrested by the police or CIO and never happen.

G. Caccia, Harare

JP: It's good to know that not everyone lives in fear. But I don't believe that every Zimbabwean I spoke to was trying to get a favour from me. Of course, I was speaking mostly to the victims of housing evictions and those who are trying to help them. Those people, on the basis of their experiences, seemed to have good reason to be afraid. I admire their courage for persevering with their work in such circumstances.

I have been hesitating to e-mail my friends in Zimbabwe for fear of causing trouble for them. Do you know to what extent electronic communications are monitored by the government?

Diana S., Ann Arbor, USA

JP: Diana, that's hard to know. Some Zimbabweans are very cautious about what they say by e-mail, others don't seem to mind. It's safe to say that the government doesn't have the means to read every single e-mail, and people who are active in opposition politics or charitable work are most likely to be targeted. Why don't you just send a brief e-mail asking your friends if they think their account is safe? That in itself can't do any harm.

Did you hear anything about what has happened to the street children? Rumours are circulating that they have all been 'disappeared'. And, due to AIDS etc, in recent years the streets of Harare have been completely over run with them - and now there is not one. I am a Zimbabwean now living in London and you are bang on target about the culture of fear.

name withheld, london

JP: A good question, and one that I'm ashamed not to be able to answer adequately - I'll put some questions to humanitarian and church people in Zimbabwe and see what they can tell us. Harare these days is certainly conspicuous for its lack of street children. Some of the homes that were knocked down were "child-headed households" - parents had died of Aids, and older siblings were left to look after the younger. And in Harare's Hatcliffe Extension, I know two childcare centres were knocked down.

as you probably know, the sad truth is that the "west" has engineered this whole situation, and it benefits them a great deal if there is unrest in Africa, it means that the country can never stand on its own two feet, and that guarantees world domination for the New World Order.

Adil Chaudry, London, UK

So much about Zim. but nothing about the root cause of the situation in Zim. Want to know? Go back to British imperialist machinations and hypocrisy.

Mmoloki Wabetsho, Port Elizabeth

JP: Whatever the consequences of colonialism, or domination by powerful countries today, the fact remains that the housing demolitions that were the topic of my articles were the actions of a sovereign government in Zimbabwe.

Do you think that the people who have lost their homes may well have lost their lives?

Jean, Cheshire

JP: Some certainly did. Some were injured in the demolitions, others became ill from exposure to the elements, or from being removed far from the clinics that had been supplying medication for HIV. And as I've already mentioned, hunger is a real threat now.

Did you get any sense of ANY form of resistance to the regime? Was there a building sense of anger at all? Did you happen to see any agricultural activity, be it on commercial farms or subsistence farming.

Steve Bailey, Cape Town South Africa

I spent 4 years in Harare and feel so depressed and at the same time powerless at what's going on. My question to Justin is this: are people taking all this lying down or do you get the impression that there's some action being planned to confront the tyranny? In your opinion, is there a way forward?

Ranil, Sri Lanka/ USA

JP: Steve and Ranil: Many of those who are opposed to the regime seemed extremely despondent, with little faith in the ability of any opposition movement to help them. That said, there is a core of people working for change in very difficult circumstances.

On Steve's question about farming: I didn't get a chance to travel to commercial farming areas. In the villages, some subsistence farming is happening, but as I've said, drought is a problem at the moment. Certainly, not enough food is being produced.

This is precisely the reason that people don't give to appeals for troubled countries. There always seems to be a powerful armed thug round the corner capable of denying aid or stealing it for himself or his cronies.

John McNicholas, Blackpool England

You know, I just came back from Zimbabwe and I did not observe any of the things you are talking about - I also met with BBC and other international reporters who were interviewing people all over the country. But what worries me most about your article is its complete absence of fact - second hand fear? Fear of being photographed? My friend, it is you who is peddling fear - whatever happened to a journalism that at the very least pretended to facts? Agggghhhh, and this is the BBC?

Joseph wa Kamau, US

JP: Sure, Joseph, I see your point. The article you're referring to was a very personal one - the editors had asked me in this instance to write a personal reflection on my time in Zimbabwe. The tone and content of the other articles I wrote is rather different. Clearly, as a visitor, one's perception of a country is determined by whom one spends time with. I was there to report on the consequences of housing evictions. The victims and those trying to help them were indeed frightened.

If it was so dangerous in Zimbabwe why was it that you went there surely you could have met them across the border in South Africa or in another neighbouring country! Why go to all that danger!! It seems very silly to me

Joe Turner, Guildford, UK

JP: Joe, it's not that easy. It was hard enough to locate the displaced people in the first place, let alone bring them to another safe location. This would actually have involved a greater risk to themselves. Silly? Well, I'll let you decide.

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