

Zimbabwe war vets arm ahead of street protests

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Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe is surreptitiously arming his war veterans and violent youth brigades with guns so that they can crush the planned street protests to topple his regime next week.

The street protests have been dubbed "the final push for freedom" by the opposition.

Army sources promised chaos and bloodshed on a scale never seen before, if protesters tried to march into Mugabe's official residence in Harare.

The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) said it would begin street protests from Monday to force Mugabe out of office, but Mugabe's militant war veteran supporters have vowed to crush them. They said they would use their military experience to ensure the MDC protests "don't even take off".

According to sources, Mugabe has "opened army barracks" to the war veterans and youth militias. The sources said Mugabe was taking the MDC threats seriously. They said Mugabe was well aware that the last national strike called by the opposition had been an overwhelming success. He was therefore taking into account the possibility of an overwhelming response to the latest call.

"Mugabe's resolve to crush any challenge to his authority must not be underestimated," said a middle ranking army official, who preferred not to be identified.

Weapons

"He has ordered the army to give weapons to his war veterans and the youth brigades for his defence," added the official, insisting that they would use these guns only if necessary.

A senior army officer said there was nothing wrong with arming war veterans and youth brigades because they were considered a reserve force of the Zimbabwe National Army.

"You may recall that the war veterans have been constituted into a reserve force of the army. They are entitled to weapons, if this is necessary for them to defend their leader."

Officials say Mugabe trusts the war veterans more than the young soldiers who joined the army in large numbers after independence from Britain in 1980. He feels the war veterans are more loyal to him and more reliable than young soldiers who did not fight in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, the officials say.

The notorious war veterans, who spearheaded Mugabe's often violent farm invasions, last week vowed to use "military tactics" to thwart the planned protests against Mugabe.

Mobilise

National Liberation War Veterans' Association leader, Patrick Nyaruwata, said his militias would forcefully resist the MDC "final push for freedom".

"We have stood aside and observed you for too long and this time we will not," Nyaruwata said in a statement. "This time, using our own military experience, we will mobilise against you. I do not mince my words."

Nyaruwata added: "The consequences of any mass action will be grave. We will co-ordinate with state security

agents to fight you off.

"Remember that most top security agents in defence, the police and the Central Intelligence Organisation are war veterans and we will be co-ordinating with them."

The MDC has vowed to press ahead with its protests, despite the threats. Its spokesman, Paul Themba Nyathi, said there was nothing wrong with the people of Zimbabwe using peaceful mass protests to free themselves from "this rogue regime".

However, the MDC is not taking Mugabe's threats lightly. It has been placing full-page advertisements in Zimbabwe's independent press, urging the country's uniformed services not to allow themselves to be used against the people. The opposition party is telling the army to disobey illegal orders, warning that those who partake in Mugabe's repression will face serious consequences under a "future" MDC government. - Independent **Foreign Service**