

**May 6, 2003**

## **Negotiations in Zimbabwe Fail to Break Political Crisis**

**By GINGER THOMPSON**

JOHANNESBURG, May 5 — At the end of an afternoon of whirlwind diplomacy in Zimbabwe today, three of Africa's most powerful presidents failed to break a stalemate between President Robert Mugabe and his leading opponents that has pushed the country to the brink of economic collapse.

The visit to Zimbabwe by Presidents Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria and Bakili Muluzi of Malawi had been the focus of intense speculation by news organizations. The meeting had raised hopes across southern Africa for the start of a peaceful resolution to Zimbabwe's worst crisis since the end of white-minority rule more than two decades ago.

Zimbabwe has been ravaged by soaring inflation and unemployment, shortages of food and fuel, and cycles of state-sponsored violence against those thought to be government opponents. Two weeks ago, the tensions gave way to mixed hope and confusion when Mr. Mugabe, 79, made veiled comments to news organizations that he could be ready to retire, ending 23 years in power.

As they traveled back and forth across Harare today, the three visiting heads of state appeared beaming, sometimes arm in arm, presenting a formidable image of African unity.

But they were careful to avoid any public talk of a change in leadership in Zimbabwe. Their aides emphasized that the high-profile visit was aimed only at helping to mediate the differences between Mr. Mugabe and the leading opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, or M.D.C. But, after hours of meetings with Mr. Mugabe and the opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, there was little sign of concrete progress.

Mr. Mugabe has said he will only agree to meet with the opposition leaders on condition that they drop a lawsuit challenging the legitimacy of presidential elections last year in which Mr. Mugabe narrowly defeated Mr. Tsvangirai.

The opposition party, international human rights groups, and several foreign governments, including the United States, have charged that the elections were marred by fraud and intimidation.

Political analysts speculate that the current Mugabe government needs international recognition in order to shield the president from future prosecution for human rights violations.

"I am the president of this country and I have legitimacy," Mr. Mugabe said at a news conference in Harare today. "The M.D.C. doesn't recognize me, that's the issue. If they do, that means now the M.D.C.'s court challenge has to be withdrawn and we can start talking."

Meanwhile, Mr. Tsvangirai said he would be willing to meet with Mr. Mugabe if the government disbanded militias that have been accused of systematic brutality against opposition supporters and restored the rule of law. But it appeared that Mr. Tsvangirai refused today to agree to drop the lawsuit.

"The underlying issue is that the M.D.C. and Zanu-PF must meet," Mr. Tsvangirai said, referring to the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, Mr. Mugabe's party. "The country is in a dire state."

Mr. Obasanjo put a positive spin on the talks, calling the issue of how the election was conducted "a little point we can work out."

"On both sides we saw one common factor," he added, "earnestness for negotiations to be resumed."

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