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Seeking Help With a Crisis, Zimbabweans Go to Pretoria

By LYDIA POLGREEN

JOHANNESBURG, July 8 — The attention of Zimbabweans is being diverted south this week as President Bush holds talks in Pretoria with the South African president, Thabo Mbeki, that will surely include discussion of the political crisis in Zimbabwe.

The opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, whose leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, is on trial for treason in Harare, has sent a delegation to South Africa in the hope of capturing some of the spotlight Mr. Bush's meeting with Mr. Mbeki will bring. The delegation hopes Mr. Bush will press Mr. Mbeki to condemn President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe.

"What we have seen is solidarity among African leaders," said Gift ChimaniKire, the party's deputy secretary general, in an interview here today. "What we have not seen is solidarity from the leaders with the African people. We hope our presence here can change that."

Mr. Bush, who will hold talks with Mr. Mbeki on Wednesday as part of a five-country tour of Africa, has called for a change of leadership in Zimbabwe. His South African counterpart has been hesitant to push Mr. Mugabe to step down despite the damage the crisis in Zimbabwe could cause to his country's economy and to regional stability.

The Movement for Democratic Change has a carefully crafted message for Mr. Bush: pressure Mr. Mbeki to use his country's standing as a regional superpower to defuse the crisis in Zimbabwe, and promise to do it on a specific timetable.

"We want to lobby for regional support to bring a democratic end to the crisis," Mr. ChimaniKire said.

Last week a judge in Harare gave the Movement for Democratic Change a boost when it ruled that the party's challenge to the 2002 election, which President Mugabe won narrowly amid widespread irregularities and allegations of fraud and violence, must be assigned a court date. The court case had been stalled for 15 months.

Mr. Mugabe, on a tour of Zimbabwe's eight provinces over the weekend, spoke at huge rallies at each stop in which he ridiculed Mr. Bush and called for him and Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain to stand trial for war crimes for the "genocide which they recently committed in Iraq."

Mr. Mugabe, who is 79 and has been in power for 23 years, told a roaring crowd over the weekend in Chivi, a rural town 140 miles southwest of Harare, the capital, "If Mr. Bush is coming to seek cooperation, then he is welcome, but if he is coming to dictate what we should do, then we will say, 'Go back, Yankee.'"

While people across Africa have turned out to protest Mr. Bush's visit, in Harare, where idle young men with no jobs and no place to go fill the streets, many people wish Mr. Bush would intercede in the Zimbabwe crisis, forcefully, and cite Liberia as a model.

"When Bush arrives he should immediately send a strong statement toward Mugabe, just like what he did with Charles Taylor," said Denis Tsanga, a 19-year-old computer science student in Harare, referring to the president of Liberia. "Because as it is right now, we are suffering."

An intervention like the one under consideration in Liberia is highly unlikely, and opposition leaders have said they hope the United States will apply pressure carefully so as not to seem as though it is bullying a troubled African

nation. Indeed, there are no rebel armies threatening Harare, no tide of refugees. But each day Zimbabwe slides deeper into misery.

With the collapse of Zimbabwe's once robust farming sector, about half of the country will need food to get through to the next harvest without starving. But the United Nations food supplies in the country have dwindled to just a month's worth.

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