

Britain 'Failed' Zimbabwe

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Bilateral relations have been badly damaged but dialogue offers hope.

Just over four years ago, relations between Zimbabwe and its former colonial master Britain took a major nosedive following the former's government-supported land invasions that led to the majority white commercial farmers losing their property.

As a result, Zimbabwe is now stuck in a political and economic crisis that has both internal and global causes, and requires urgent, practical and far-reaching solutions.

Most critics argue the British government could have done more to avoid this crisis in its former sphere of influence. The way the issues raised have been covered by both international and local newspapers merely widened the rift between the two countries, with the Zimbabwe government - blamed for taking advantage of the land issue to buy votes - attacking the British media for being racist and only concerned about the plight of white farmers of British ancestry at the expense of the ordinary black person.

Relations between the two countries remain tense in the absence of proper political and diplomatic engagements. So much so that British foreign secretary Jack Straw was genuinely embarrassed to have found himself shaking hands "accidentally" with President Robert Mugabe at a recent United Nations meeting in New York.

Zimbabwe is now a nation in transition, and only broad-based dialogue and negotiations will save the country from total collapse. Britain will be expected to play its part in this process.

In what could be a first step toward reconciliation, Prime Minister Tony Blair's former international development secretary Clare Short told IWPR that the Labour government had "failed" Zimbabwe, and argued that the current crisis may not have become so acute if London had handled the situation differently.

Short thinks the only way forward now is for the British government to work with the international community and Zimbabwe's neighbours to ensure a new legitimate government is elected in Harare so relations can improve.

Short charged that "unnecessary rhetoric" on the part of the British - particularly her former cabinet colleague Peter Hain - was partly to blame for frosty relations between the two nations, and argued that behind-the-scenes diplomacy could have saved the situation.

"We failed Zimbabwe. We should have tried harder and done better," declared Short, who has herself been singled out by analysts for fuelling the breakdown of relations between the two countries.

Short wrote a letter to the Zimbabwean authorities on behalf of London in 1997, in which she refused to provide funds to pay off white farmers to allow massive land reforms to be implemented as per the 1979 Lancaster House Constitution that brought political independence to Zimbabwe in 1980.

She stands by the letter, in which she stated that London had no special responsibility to fund Zimbabwe's land reforms as they had no "links to former colonial interests", but points out that it did not mean that the UK government was going to stop providing conditional support for the process.

In any case, Short says, the previous Tory government had provided enough resources for land purchases, but the extra cash had not been taken up by Harare.

Many analysts believe this letter, coupled with statements from other senior British politicians, displayed a lack of understanding about the issues at hand and dealt a major blow to relations between the two countries. They say the British government announced a "hasty" foreign policy on Zimbabwe without realising what was going on in the country and took a stand that was not supported by most countries in the southern African region. Some believe Blair and his colleagues were either not well advised, or were not accepting advice from their civil servants at all.

Stephen Chan, a professor of International Relations and Dean of the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, SOAS, said, "My own feeling is that [London] was not taking proper advice [at that time]. They didn't stop to consider any deeply sophisticated analysis - they just shot their mouths off before they had time to think about it.

"[Peter] Hain was too quick to condemn. He should certainly have issued statements of deep concern, but he escalated the level of criticism too quickly. Robin Cook, who was prone to trust his own judgement over that of the Foreign Office, probably encouraged him in this. The entire Labour government was at that stage under-briefed about Africa in general."

When asked if London would resume funding for Zimbabwe's land reforms at some stage, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, FCO, said that Britain would only back a programme which was "fair, transparent and legal" and described the current programme as being "inconsistent" with these values. Any assistance for land reform in Zimbabwe would be given solely to reduce poverty, as Short had said when she was still the international development secretary.

The FCO said that as details of proper land reforms for Zimbabwe are yet to be outlined by the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, under the 1998 land donor's conference for Zimbabwe, it would be "premature" to speculate about the nature of any British contribution. The department also declined to comment on Short's criticism of government policy and ministers.

Analyst Laurie Nathan, originally of the University of Cape Town and now an academic at the London School of Economics' Crisis States Centre, also believe that the Blair government made a major mistake by not fully understanding the land crisis in Zimbabwe, and by throwing out the Lancaster House agreement that bound the British to further assistance.

"One of the British government's mistakes is its failure to acknowledge that colonialism and Lancaster House were and remain very much a part of the problem," said Nathan. "As a result, Mugabe has completely outmanoeuvred Blair in the political debate as far as Africans are concerned. The former has successfully portrayed the latter's position as neo-colonialism."

However, Nathan believes that the UK and other EU states were right to condemn Harare's abrogation of the rule of law, extensive human rights abuses and pervasive state violence in Zimbabwe. "When states ignore these serious situations, they implicitly endorse them by default. Regional solidarity with the Zimbabwe regime has done a grave disservice to the people of that country," he said.

But some analysts think that the British government's stance on Zimbabwe's bad human rights record did not necessarily feed into their policy towards the country since this came after Zimbabwe had already tried to make contact with the Labour government.

"My own feeling is that [London] was indeed concerned about human rights, but this was not part of a long-term operational policy," argued Professor Chan. "The FCO was much given to rhetoric about 'ethical foreign policy' but had not thought deeply about the Zimbabwean situation, and was much caught by surprise by the farm invasions in 2000. Once Britain embarked upon its link between human rights and its attitude to Zimbabwe there was no going back."

Chan blames both governments for the total breakdown of bilateral relations which has resulted in the suffering of ordinary people, "There should have been much more sophisticated diplomacy behind the scenes between the British and Zimbabwe governments, and both sides should take some blame for that. But as London has far greater diplomatic resources at its disposal, it should have been more proactive and the ministers should have been taking more advice."

He believes that Clare Short's letter, though not well judged, did not cause as much damage to relations as Blair's response to Mugabe at the 1997 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Edinburgh, when the British premier completely ignored the Zimbabwean president.

"Mugabe took offence at the way he was treated there and Blair simply didn't understand why," Chan said. "If the two had found some way to talk to each other, then a very great deal that happened afterwards would not have happened."

However, all is not yet lost for Zimbabwe. Analysts believe that the next 12 months will be crucial, particularly with parliamentary elections due in March 2005, which Chan predicts will be won by the ruling Zanu-PF with or without the participation of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

As for the re-establishment of good relations, many observers believe that both sides are waiting for the right time to re-engage. While Chan dismissed the "New York handshake" between Straw and Mugabe as "a genuine accident", he points to the UK government's decision to allow Zimbabwe's Reserve Bank Governor, Gedion Gono, to visit Britain twice in a year as evidence that something is happening behind the scenes.

Brian Kagoro of the Zimbabwe Crisis Coalition told IWPR that an eventual solution should involve both countries resuming dialogue by re-visiting the Lancaster House agreement, as it poses most of the problems facing Zimbabwe today.

"Part of the problem in Zimbabwe is that part of what Mugabe is saying is right," said Kagoro. "Nobody, including the British, was being sincere in trying to pay for the land reform programme - hence the chaos we have today."

Professor Sam Moyo of the Southern African Regional Institute of Policy Studies also believes the only way to find a solution to Zimbabwe's problems is for both countries to re-visit Lancaster House accord.

"None of the important actors like Britain, the Zimbabwe government and the opposition MDC are trying to be straight about the whole issue as they all have different agendas. We believe that they will have to behave in a more transparent manner to avoid further problems."

Chan said, "I think that sheer bloody-minded pragmatism is going to kick in at some point - probably at the end of a 12 month period from now - and when it does, the bad blood between Zimbabwe and Britain is not going to get in the way. Of course it will be embarrassing and difficult but they both know it has to be done at some point."

The British media's coverage of Zimbabwean matters has come in for some harsh criticism from analysts and observers. Many have noted racist overtones in some sections of the media, and blame gay activist Peter Tatchell's portrayal of Mugabe as a homophobe for adding to the British public's disapproval of the situation, which ultimately affected how the authorities handled the crisis.

Moyo told IWPR, "Most local and international journalists failed to understand that we have a historical conflict at hand, and wrote articles that fit into the polarised situation that Zimbabwe finds itself in today."

Many journalists covering unfolding events in Zimbabwe became so involved in politics that they became "agents of change" seeking to remove Mugabe from power, he said, which led them to produce biased stories.

Gary Younge, a United States-based columnist with Britain's Guardian newspaper, said that some of the UK coverage did not help the Zimbabwean situation at all and believes lessons must be learnt from this.

"The UK media treated the issue in much the same way as the Zimbabwean government," he told IWPR. "They said the story was about white farmers and they didn't place it in a political context, turning it into a case of black mobs attacking white farmers without looking at the history. [This seemed to] confirm Mugabe's views that people are not interested in the black majority."

Sandra Nyaira is the former political editor of The Daily News, an independent newspaper shut down by the government last year. She has recently completed her Masters in International Journalism at London's City University.

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