

Gukurahundi Ghost Haunts Matabeleland

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Zimbabwean leaders still refuse to talk about the mass killings designed to destroy support for President Robert Mugabe's political opponents.

Almost a quarter of a century on, the ghost of Gukurahundi continues to stalk Zimbabwe's Matabeleland region.

Gukurahundi – a Shona term meaning “the rain that washes away the chaff” – was a military crackdown in rural Matabeleland and the Midlands in the early Eighties in which an estimated 20,000 people were killed, most of them civilians.

Pressure groups in Zimbabwe continue to campaign to persuade President Robert Mugabe's administration to finally make public what happened during the offensive, which they say amounted to a government-sponsored genocide.

They are calling for a truth and reconciliation commission to be established, similar to the one set up to help South Africans come to terms with the human rights abuses perpetrated under apartheid.

However, the Zimbabwean authorities are resisting pressure both from activists and from families of victims, who have demanded compensation for relatives who were killed or disappeared without trace.

Mugabe, who is on record as saying the massacres were a “moment of madness”, has refused to offer a public apology for what many regard as a policy of ethnic cleansing that targeted the Ndebele people .

In 1983-84, Mugabe, then prime minister of the newly-independent Zimbabwe, dispatched the Fifth Brigade - an elite unit trained by the North Koreans - to the Midlands and Matabeleland to quash what he said were insurgents bent on overthrowing him. He accused Joshua Nkomo, his main political rival at the time and leader of the ZAPU party, of supporting the insurgents and vowed to crush those he termed “dissidents”.

The ensuing offensive left unarmed villagers at the mercy of the military. Survivors said the killings were systematic and targeted ZAPU officials and also leading community figures such as teachers, nurses and village headmen. Many of the dead were buried in unmarked graves or thrown down disused mines.

ZAPU leaders were expelled from government and incarcerated.

Nkomo accepted a deal with Mugabe in 1987 in an effort to end the hostilities. He became one of the country's two vice-presidents, and his party was subsumed into the ruling ZANU party, which was renamed ZANU-PF with the added letters standing for “Patriotic Front”.

Ibhetshu Likazulu, a human rights group based in Matabeleland, commemorates the Gukurahundi killings on January 20 each year. Its leader Qhubekani Dube is demanding that Mugabe be brought to account for the campaign.

“Nothing has ever been officially made public, despite Mugabe himself having set up commissions of inquiry in the 1980s to investigate the Gukurahundi massacres,” Dube told IWPR.

“What we only have are eyewitness accounts, and many of the people who suffered are now dead. What is Robert Mugabe hiding? We will never rest as long as the truth is not told about why this terrible thing happened.”

The only comprehensive report on the Gukurahundi campaign was published in 1989 by the Legal Resources Foundation and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace. The latter group tried to present the report to the authorities when it came out, but the government has refused to accept its findings.

A documentary about Gukurahundi made by a Bulawayo-based filmmaker was launched in South Africa last year, but has yet to be shown inside Zimbabwe. The producers say plans are afoot to showcase it this year despite concerns that authorities will not allow a public viewing.

“It is time the nation was told about Gukurahundi. This cannot be allowed die a natural death just like that,” Zenzele Ndebele, who produced the documentary, told IWPR.

“We had to be extremely careful when we were making this documentary, for fear of reprisals from the authorities.”

“A lot of mystery surrounds the Gukurahundi era, and the resistance by the government to discuss the issue is probably because the people who committed the crimes are still alive. Therefore... trying to make something which would expose them was obviously going to be resisted.”

One source of resistance to attempts to shed more light on the atrocities comes from former ZAPU leaders who were persecuted by Mugabe during the Gukurahundi campaign but who have since become senior figures in government and ZANU-PF.

Some activists in Matabeleland say the province should declare itself a federal state, accusing Mugabe of deliberately failing to invest there in the years since Gukurahundi. But such calls have failed to win significant support in the region, and political parties that placed devolution on their agendas have fallen by the wayside in past elections.

Ibhetshu Likazulu remains committed to talking about the ghost of Gukurahundi, whatever happens in the joint presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for March 29.

“Even if Mugabe loses in the coming polls, that will not stop the push to have those who committed the crimes against humanity prosecuted,” said Dube.

Yamikani Mwando is the pseudonym of a journalist in Zimbabwe.

Location: Africa

Topic: Zimbabwe

Focus: Zimbabwe Crisis Reports

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/gukurahundi-ghost-haunts-matabeleland>