

Mbeki Policy Failing

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South African leader's reluctance to get tough with Mugabe said to have contributed to Zimbabwe's demise.

South Africa has begun to suffer the consequences of President Thabo Mbeki's ineffective policy of "quiet diplomacy" towards Robert Mugabe's regime as thousands of hopeless Zimbabwean youths invade the country from across the crocodile-infested Limpopo River.

The government's official daily *The Herald* reported that about 100 Zimbabweans are illegally crossing into South Africa every day in a vain search of jobs - and there are indications that a recent upsurge in crime there is linked to the illegal immigrants.

Many observers believe that President Mbeki's bears a good deal of responsibility for the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe.

"South Africa is reaping the whirlwind. If Mbeki had been sterner with Mugabe from the onset of the crisis six years ago, Zimbabwe would not be in a situation where almost all its youths are unemployable. There would be no need for these youths to invade South Africa looking for non-existent jobs," said a veteran Zimbabwean journalist who has written widely on the implications of Mbeki's policy on Harare.

Zimbabwe's economy, which began plunging in the mid-1980s, went into a tailspin in 2000 when Mugabe faced imminent defeat in parliamentary elections at the hands of a young opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change. The MDC had taken advantage of widespread discontent and mobilised mainly working class people to challenge Mugabe for power.

Earlier that year, in February, Mugabe had suffered a stunning defeat when he lost a referendum on a new constitution that commentators said was designed to entrench his power and give him the right to extend the twenty years he had been in office by another ten.

His proposed new constitution, rejected by the electorate, would also have allowed the government to expropriate land legally without compensation. Mugabe believed, incorrectly as it turned out, that this would help secure the rural vote.

In the aftermath of defeat, Mugabe gave the go-ahead to veterans of the 1970s war of liberation to invade commercial farms, which mostly belonged to white farmers. The invasions destroyed commercial agriculture, which for the first two decades of independence had been the backbone of the country's agro-based economy and Zimbabwe's biggest export earner.

The country deteriorated into lawlessness as the land grab became a free-for-all. Government ministers, judges, army officers and pro-government journalists were given farms that they used mainly as weekend retreats rather than for intense production.

The international community urged Mbeki, as Mugabe's most powerful neighbour, to force the Zimbabwean leader to restore the rule of law. But Mbeki insisted on his policy of "quiet diplomacy", so quiet that few people wondered what it consisted of.

It did not work, and Tito Mboweni, the powerful governor of South Africa's Reserve Bank, warned, "The wheels have come off there [in Zimbabwe]. I am saying this as forcefully as I am because the developments in Zimbabwe are affecting us and stressing us unnecessarily."

"The situation has become untenable when it is seen that the highest office in that land seems to support illegal means of land reform, land invasions, beating up of people, blood flowing everywhere."

The veteran Zimbabwean journalist told IWPR, "Mbeki was warned this policy would not work on a strong-headed despot such as Mugabe and that the meltdown in Zimbabwe would destabilise South Africa."

Mugabe's farm invasion strategy left more than half a million farm workers without jobs. To survive, these workers and their families flooded the cities where they got involved in different forms of informal work, including crime. Economic meltdown had left about 70 per cent of the population without jobs, so the influx of another half a million jobless people into the market was too much for the informal sector to bear.

All urban centres turned against Mugabe's ZANU PF government, with the MDC winning almost all seats in cities and towns across the country. Mugabe is believed to have stolen the vote in the 2000 and 2005 general elections when evidence of voter intimidation and ballot rigging was overwhelming.

Mbeki endorsed both these elections as free and fair, as well as a separate presidential poll in 2002, which many observers, including those from the West, claim the MDC's Morgan Tsvangirai won. In the face of lawlessness, bad governance, election rigging and blatant violations of human rights, western countries imposed crippling sanctions on the Mugabe government. Another mainstay of the Zimbabwean economy, tourism, was destroyed as the number of visitors plummeted dramatically. But Mbeki still did not act.

In May 2005, Mugabe launched the much-condemned Operation Murambatsvina (Drive Out the Filth), ostensibly to pre-empt a Ukrainian-style "Orange Revolution". The operation left a further 2.5 million people without a source of livelihood as their informal businesses were destroyed. A United Nations report estimated 700,000 people were left homeless as police and soldiers moved into working class suburbs and destroyed homes with bulldozers and sledgehammers.

Calls for Mbeki to act again went unheeded.

"We warned him [Mbeki] that with so many people without sources of livelihood across the Limpopo, South Africa would not remain untouched," said the veteran journalist.

A South African embassy official in Harare said recently that the upsurge of crime in South Africa could be directly attributed to illegal Zimbabwean immigrants.

"Many violent crimes in South Africa today are perpetrated by Zimbabweans," he said, adding that the embassy had conducted a survey of all new expensive vehicles plying the streets of Harare and had established that at least one in five had been stolen from South Africa. He said the issue had been discussed at bilateral level but it was difficult to contain because of the continuing deterioration of the Zimbabwean economy, which saw more and more desperate people crossing into South Africa.

A social scientist at the University of Zimbabwe said many Zimbabwean youths were under the false impression that South Africa offered boundless opportunities and all they had to do was cross the Limpopo by any means necessary. But they find the reality very different. "They see the rainbow across the Limpopo but it is exactly that - just an optical illusion," she said. "There are no ready jobs in the 'Rainbow Nation', so the vicious cycle of hopelessness will continue and the youths easily turn to the only means that can keep them fed if for just a while - crime."

She said the youths in Johannesburg and other big South African cities begin with petty crimes but eventually graduate into big-time crime such as carjacking, bank robbery and burglary. Women end up in prostitution.

"South Africa now has to divert lots of human and financial resources to fighting crime instead of directing the same resources to developmental issues," asserted the veteran journalist.

Mavis Makuni, writing in Zimbabwe's independent Financial Gazette, said, "Mbeki's government is prepared to get tough with the victims of the economic and political crisis in this country while continuing to appease the political leadership responsible for the situation." It is estimated that at least two million Zimbabweans have flooded illegally into South Africa, which has strengthened military and police patrols along its Limpopo River border with Zimbabwe. Last year alone Pretoria said it deported 97,000 illegal Zimbabwean immigrants at taxpayer's expense.

But once repatriated back to Zimbabwe they quickly re-enter South Africa. "It's a no-win situation until Zimbabwe begins to improve and create jobs for its people," said the South African embassy official.

But that will be a long time coming. Since 2000, the Zimbabwean economy has regressed more than 50 years and the desperation of the youth is similar to that of the 1970s when hordes of young men and women crossed borders into Mozambique and Zambia to join forces fighting Ian Smith's white minority regime.

"In the 1970s young people had no lives. They could not get jobs. They could not get a decent education so they did the only thing left, namely to fight the regime," said the social scientist. "The situation has come full circle. The youths are in the same invidious situation and they are jumping borders and who knows what they will do next?"

The veteran journalist added, "If one country in a region is unstable, the instability will spread across the region: that's the simple truth Mbeki refused to accept all those years ago. Soon the youths might be ready to fight. They have got absolutely nothing to lose."

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