

Mugabe Keen on SADC Rescue Package

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Harare leader wants economic lifeboat not political mediation from SADC.

The air is beginning to clear on the Southern African Development Community's economic turnaround strategy for Zimbabwe.

The initiative is spearheaded by the regional grouping's executive secretary, Tomaz Augusto Salamao, who was in Zimbabwe recently on his second visit since the emergency meeting held in Dar es Salaam in March.

The SADC Extraordinary Summit followed the brutal beating up in police custody of Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, leader Morgan Tsvangirai and dozens other political activists on March 11 as they were on their way to attend a prayer meeting in the restive poor neighbourhood of Highfield.

The images of the brutal beatings flashed on television sets across the globe sent shock waves around the region and prompted the SADC, which had hitherto stood by Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe, to act.

The SADC meeting tasked Salamao with studying the economic situation and proposing measures on how the regional bloc could help the country's economic recovery.

South African president Thabo Mbeki was tasked with leading a parallel process of political mediation which would bring the warring parties to the negotiating table and set the ball rolling for free and fair elections to be held early next year.

But now it is becoming increasingly clear that Mugabe and his ruling Zanu-PF are not interested in the Mbeki-led initiative, preferring the Salamao one because it involves a financial rescue package.

A diplomatic source said this week that the SADC had or was in the process of mobilising a three billion US dollar rescue package for Zimbabwe and Salamao was setting up a secretariat to administer the fund.

"After his first visit to Zimbabwe in April Dr Salamao came up with the figure of three billion dollars as balance of payments support for Zimbabwe which SADC wishes to see stabilise the economy," said the source, who is close to the SADC initiative.

"But SADC has resolved that they cannot hand over that kind of money to the Mugabe government and have to set up a secretariat to administer it."

Indeed, in an interview shortly after his arrival in Harare, Salamao said he was leading a three-man advance team that he wished to introduce to government.

“We are here to continue what we have started already - that is doing our assessment and research and coming up with a recommendation that we will forward to the relevant authority,” he told the daily government broadsheet, The Herald. He said the report would be ready for the relevant authorities by month end.

The diplomatic source said that considering the state of the Zimbabwean economy and the amount of corruption that has permeated government structures, it would be foolish of the regional grouping to entrust the Zimbabwean government with running the fund.

Also, he said, Mugabe was facing a mortal battle in the combined presidential and parliamentary elections to be held by March next year.

“Uppermost in Mugabe’s mind is his own political survival. If given access to that kind of money, he would divert it for his fight for survival. He would use the money to bolster his Zanu-PF party’s chances of survival next year instead of injecting the money into the economy - hence the necessity of the secretariat.”

The Mbeki initiative seems to have suffered a stillbirth, however. Hawks in Zanu-PF party do not see why political mediation is necessary because they regard the MDC as now mortally wounded. They see their party as the only important player on the political scene.

“After the brutal battering of opposition leaders on March 11 and subsequent arrests and torture of other political activists, the MDC is no longer the same,” said the diplomatic source.

Indeed, Zanu-PF has now targeted structures of the MDC in order to destroy the opposition party at grassroots level. In the past, police brutality focused on the high echelons of the party but now the target is the small supporter.

An MDC insider said this week the party was now in the invidious position where it no longer had grassroots structures, “Often we get calls from our grassroots leaders and supporters saying they have skipped the border and are now in a neighbouring country. The situation is worse than people think.”

Zanu-PF strategy, the insider said, was to destroy the MDC structures by the end of June. In this scenario, the Mbeki mediation becomes unimportant. Instead, the ruling party is pinning its hope on the Salamao initiative and the 18th amendment to the national constitution which it gazetted on June 8. The proposed amendments include expanding the lower house of parliament from 150 to 210 members. The extra constituencies would be created in Mugabe’s strongholds, the rural areas where the majority of voters live.

According to the proposed amendment, the Delimitation Commission - answerable to Mugabe - would delimit the new constituency boundaries. “It would seem this would guarantee a Zanu-PF victory in the harmonised presidential and parliamentary elections but the state of the economy still has to be contended with,” said the MDC insider.

According to the diplomatic source, this is where Salamao comes in. A huge injection of money would see the economy improved somewhat by the time of the elections in March next year. And to give the impression that Zanu-PF will be pivotal to the turnaround of the economy, the ruling party has arm-twisted business and labour into a pact called “the social contract” through which it hopes to control the operations of the two other important players in the economy.

“Mugabe is prepared to sup with Dr Salamao because he desperately needs a rescue package,” said the diplomatic source, adding that Salamao’s secretariat would act as a surrogate central bank to ensure the money is used for the benefit of the economy and not for Mugabe’s party.

Commentators say Zimbabwe has had a long history of financial assistance from donors since independence in 1980 but funds donated have never been properly accounted for.

In March 1981, for instance, at the Zimbabwe Conference for Reconstruction and Development, ZIMCORD, more than 17 million British pounds were raised to finance the reconstruction and development of the country after almost a decade of war.

According to the British government, between 1980 and 1985 the United Kingdom provided 47 million pounds for land reform: 20 million as a specific land resettlement grant and 27 million in the form of budgetary support to help meet the Zimbabwe government’s own contribution to the programme. The land resettlement grant was signed in 1981, and substantially spent by 1988.

There has never been a proper audit of how the money was spent although the UK government acknowledges that real progress was made on some projects. Since independence, Britain has provided more than 500 million pounds in bilateral support for development in Zimbabwe. In total, the wider donor community has provided over two billion dollars in assistance since 1980.

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