

Mugabe's Chosen Mediator Criticised

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Widespread disappointment at the appointment of a man seen as an ally of President Mugabe instead of a planned intervention by the United Nations.

Disappointment, despair and helplessness sum up the way many ordinary Zimbabweans feel following a decision by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to abandon efforts to mediate in their country's ever-deepening political, economic and social crisis.

There is little confidence here that the mediation effort Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe has promoted as an alternative – using former Tanzanian president Benjamin Mkapa, seen as a political ally – will yield any results.

Although Annan's mission had been widely supported by the international community, he withdrew from it after meeting President Mugabe at the July summit of the African Union in Gambia. There Mugabe told the UN's top man that he was not needed, and that Mkapa would do the job instead.

Asked whether he still planned to visit Zimbabwe, Annan replied, "You don't have two mediators."

Mugabe suggested that the UN chief abandoned his mediation role because, as an African, he would not wish to be tarnished by being seen to be influenced by or aligned with the British government. Annan immediately denied this assertion, saying Mugabe's appointment of Mkapa as mediator meant his own diplomatic initiative was dead in the water.

The prospect of intervention by Annan had been the last ray of hope for many Zimbabweans, who thought he might have been able, against the odds, to push Mugabe to the negotiating table to forge a new constitution in which democratic rights would be ensured and constructive international relations restored. They also hoped that Annan's presence would make the international community more engaged in addressing the disaster facing Zimbabwe.

South African president Thabo Mbeki, who has in the past been criticised for taking a softly-softly attitude towards his northern neighbour, said the UN mediation effort was the key to resolving Zimbabwe's crisis and that Annan could help improve the country's relations with the West.

Less optimism surrounds Mkapa's involvement. As a friend and political ally of Mugabe, his impartiality is questioned by many in Zimbabwe. In addition, although Annan stepped aside because Mkapa was already engaged for the task, the two mediation efforts are in reality quite different in nature.

Mkapa, who was voted out of office in Tanzania in November 2005, last year described his Zimbabwean counterpart as a "champion of democracy". While he was still president, his was one of the few voices who endorsed the 2002 and 2005 elections in Zimbabwe as free and fair.

In a letter to Mugabe last year, Mkapa said, "You have been firm [in] defending the inalienable right of the people of your country to free, democratic and sovereign governance. Your firmness was good for all of Africa."

Giving one of his last speeches before stepping down as head of state, Mkapa shocked delegates at the World Economic Forum Africa Summit in Cape Town by describing Mugabe as "one of the last upstanding Africans".

He proceeded to praise Mugabe's notorious Operation Murambatsvina ("drive out the rubbish), in which the homes of more than 700,000 of the urban poor were destroyed by security forces last year, in what officials said was a redevelopment project but critics decried as a campaign to displace potential opposition voters.

It was these mass demolitions that impelled Annan to dispatch Anna Tibaijuka, a senior UN official of Tanzanian origin, to visit Zimbabwe as his special envoy.

Tibaijuka lambasted the destruction as inhuman, saying that it had affected 2.4 million people directly or indirectly, and that Mugabe had shown "indifference to human suffering". She also said the resulting humanitarian crisis meant the campaign represented a violation of international human rights laws.

Mkapa is likely to pursue a line favourable to the Zimbabwean leader, according to Brian Raftopoulos, who heads the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town but was until recently professor of politics at the University of Zimbabwe.

"Mkapa is an ally of Mugabe. He will not be an effective mediator, but the messenger of Mugabe internationally," said Raftopoulos.

Political analysts in Zimbabwe say the focus of Mkapa's mediation is all wrong. Like Mugabe himself, he sees Zimbabwe's problems as rooted in a bilateral dispute between Mugabe's government and former colonial power, Britain.

The Zimbabwean leader has consistently said that his country's troubles stem from his long-standing dispute with British prime minister Tony Blair, who he alleges has used international pressure to punish him and sabotage the country's economy because of the land reform programme in 2000, in which nearly 5,000 farms were confiscated from their white owners.

"Our economy is under siege," Mugabe said in a recent interview with Zimbabwean journalists. "And this is because of the actions of our enemies, led by Britain, who have imposed sanctions on us."

Britain and other western countries say the sanctions, including travel and banking restrictions, are purely individual and are aimed at Zimbabwe's political and military leaders, not the country as a whole.

And 26 years after Zimbabwe became independent, many argue that the colonial past is largely irrelevant and that the problems Zimbabwe now faces are internal.

Britain's new ambassador to Zimbabwe, Andrew Pocock, poured cold water on the view that the fundamental problem is London's relationship with Mugabe.

"The substance of the problem is not, as the government of Zimbabwe contends, a bilateral difference with the United Kingdom," said Pocock. "It is rather, as the European Union, United States and many others in the international community have made clear, a problem between the government of Zimbabwe and its people. At its heart is the way Zimbabwe is governed.... Zimbabwe's problems are mounting. They stem from bad policy."

Pocock said Mugabe's decision to block the Annan visit meant the country had lost an opportunity to build bridges with the international community.

"He [Annan] sought to help the government of Zimbabwe make reforms that the country desperately needs to arrest its deepening decline," he said.

Gillian Dare, first secretary at the British embassy in Harare, confirmed that it would be meaningless for Mkapa to try to mediate between the two countries. "This is not a bilateral dispute, so no mediation is required between Britain and Zimbabwe," she said. "No one will be able to help unless President Mugabe's policy evolves in different and sustainable directions."

The view that the causes of the crisis lie in the government's own policies is shared by many observers.

Jonathan Moyo, formerly Mugabe's information minister but now an independent member of parliament, is dismissive of attempts to blame outsiders. "African leaders with this mendacious nationalistic outlook always blame their former colonial powers for every major ill in their national politics or economy while accepting no responsibility whatsoever for their own policies or lack of," Moyo wrote in the Zimbabwe Independent earlier this month.

"The mediation by Mkapa is bound to fail if it is guided by Mugabe's claim that the crisis is mainly due to a bilateral dispute with Britain. One thing for sure is that as soon as Mkapa gets down to work, he will discover that the real critical issue is not about an alleged bilateral dispute, but about failure of governance, policies and leadership since [independence in] 1980."

The United States and France have issued statements saying Mugabe's attempts at rapprochement with Britain will count for nothing unless it is preceded by dialogue within the country.

Tendai Biti, secretary-general of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, says the mandate given to Mkapa is ambiguous, when what is needed is an impartial arbitrator with a well-defined mandate chosen by all parties to the negotiations.

"Mkapa thinks like ZANU-PF," said Biti, referring to the ruling party in Zimbabwe.

Ordinary Zimbabweans have little confidence that Mkapa's intervention will make a difference.

"What can Mkapa do?" asked Simba Chawasarira, a Harare resident who struggles to keep his family of three children going on 20 million Zimbabwean dollars (200 US dollars) a month. "He is already biased, and we don't want to hear about Britain on this issue - where does Britain come into our problems? So if

Mkapa is going to focus on improving relations with Britain and not help resolve the internal political crisis, what is the point of having him?"

Chawasarira said he and many of his friends had placed all their hopes in a mediation effort led by the UN chief.

"I was so disappointed when I heard that he was no longer coming," he said. "There is no longer any hope of the crisis being resolved soon. I can see Mugabe going to 2010, and I just don't want to imagine where we will be, and how we will survive another four years."

Joseph Magariro is a pseudonym used by an IWPR contributor in Zimbabwe.

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