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## A Decade of Suffering in Zimbabwe

*Economic Collapse and Political Repression under Robert Mugabe*

by David Coltart

### *Executive Summary*

**O**n March 29, 2008, Zimbabwe will hold presidential and parliamentary elections. Few people believe that they will be free and fair or that Robert Mugabe and his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front party will fail to return to office.

That is a tragedy, because Mugabe and his cronies are chiefly responsible for an economic meltdown that has turned one of Africa's most prosperous countries into a country with one of the lowest life expectancies in the world. Since 1994, the average life expectancy in Zimbabwe has fallen from 57 years to 34 years for women and from 54 years to 37 years for men. Some 3,500 Zimbabweans die every week from the combined effects of HIV/AIDS, poverty, and malnutrition. Half a million Zimbabweans may have died already. There is no freedom of speech or assembly in Zimbabwe, and the state has used violence to intimidate and murder its opponents.

At the root of Zimbabwe's problems is a corrupt political elite that has, with considerable international support, behaved with utter impunity for some two decades. This elite is determined to hang on to power no matter what the consequences, lest it be held to account for the genocide in Matabeleland in the early 1980s and the wholesale looting of Zimbabwe that followed the mismanaged land reform in 2000.

When change comes to Zimbabwe, the nation will have to rediscover the rule of law and the sanctity of persons and property. The public discourse and the economy will have to be reopened. The new government will have to embrace a more limited idea of government and rescind legislation that makes the operation of the private sector next to impossible. Moreover, the new government will have to find a way for the people of Zimbabwe to heal the wounds caused by decades of political violence.

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## Snapshot of an Economic Collapse

The economic decline of Zimbabwe, which started in 1997, has been startling (see Figure 1). For example, if not for remittances from relatives abroad, the 2007 purchasing power of the average Zimbabwean would have fallen to levels last seen in the 1950s. In terms of physical output, about 35 years of economic progress have been undone in a decade. Gross domestic product (GDP) declined by about 43 percent between 2000 and 2007.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, every sector of the formerly diverse Zimbabwean economy was affected. The mainstay of the economy, agriculture, was all but destroyed by the politically expedient and often violent land reform program initiated by Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front government in 2000. For example, annual wheat production has plummeted from a high of over 300,000 tons in 1990 to less than 50,000 in 2007 (see Figure 2).

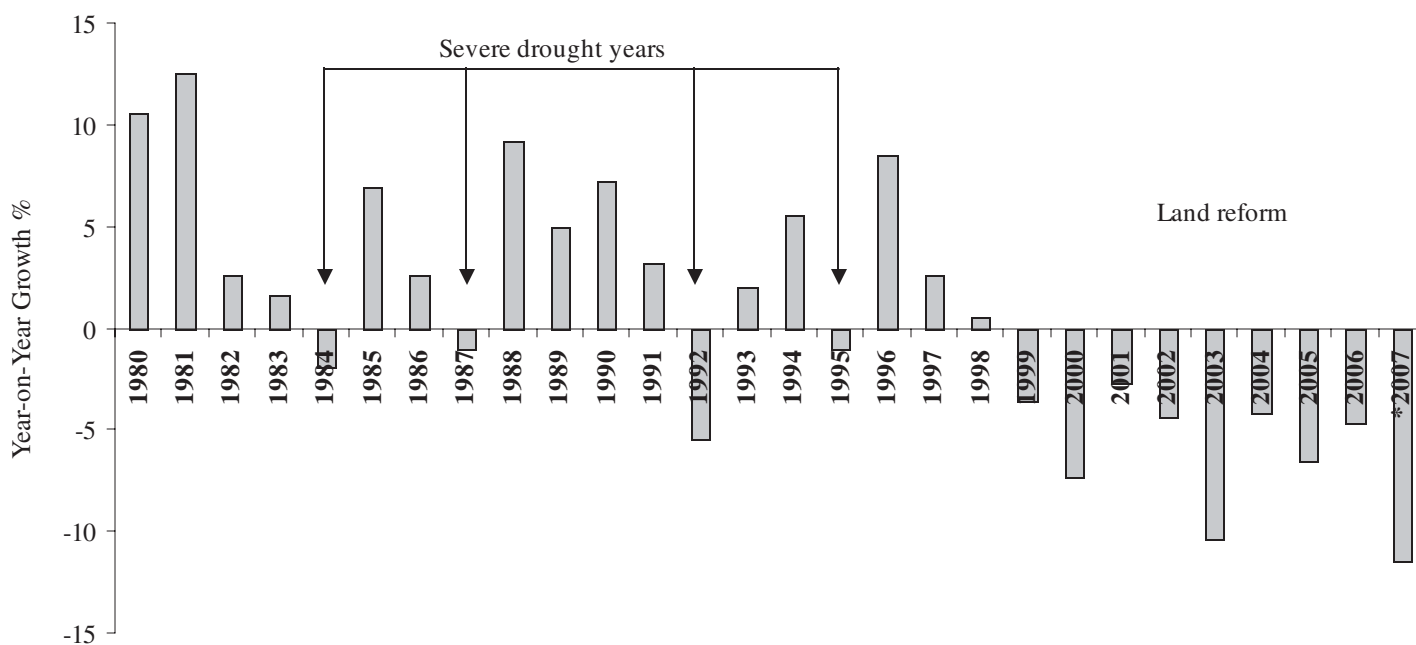
The tobacco industry, which was Zimbab-

we's single largest generator of foreign exchange and accounted for almost a third of Zimbabwe's foreign exchange earnings in 2000, has almost completely collapsed. The crop that earned some US\$600 million in 2000 generated less than US\$125 million in 2007 (see Figure 3).

The government's failure to keep spending in line with the requirements of the Economic Structural Adjustment Program that was administered by the International Monetary Fund meant that the government had to borrow domestically—thus driving up the rate of interest and with it also the cost of borrowing for manufacturers. The manufacturing sector has shrunk by more than 47 percent between 1998 and 2006, which carried output levels back to figures recorded in 1972(see Figure 4).<sup>2</sup>

Foreign aid that Zimbabwe received as part of the ESAP strengthened the Zimbabwean dollar and increased imports. Local manufacturers, therefore, found themselves under pressure from the rapid increases in local costs, particularly interest rates, and the decreasing demand for their goods as competition from imports increased.<sup>3</sup>

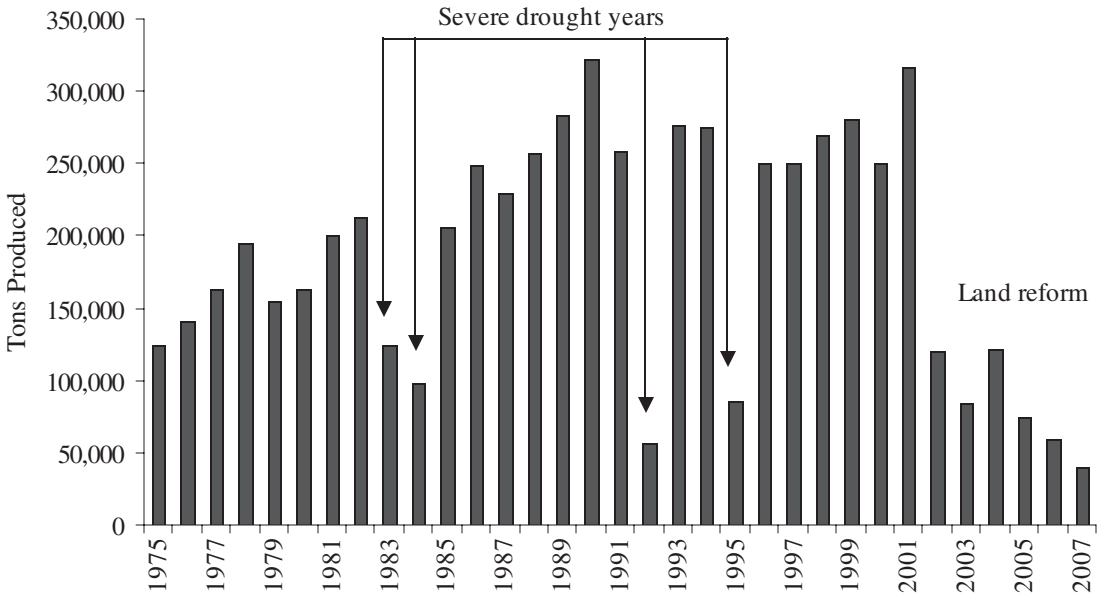
**Figure 1**  
Annual GDP Growth in Zimbabwe, 1980–2007



Source: John Robertson, "August 2007 Forecast Paper," Robertson Economic Information Services for Zimbabwean Statistics, <http://www.economic.co.zw>.

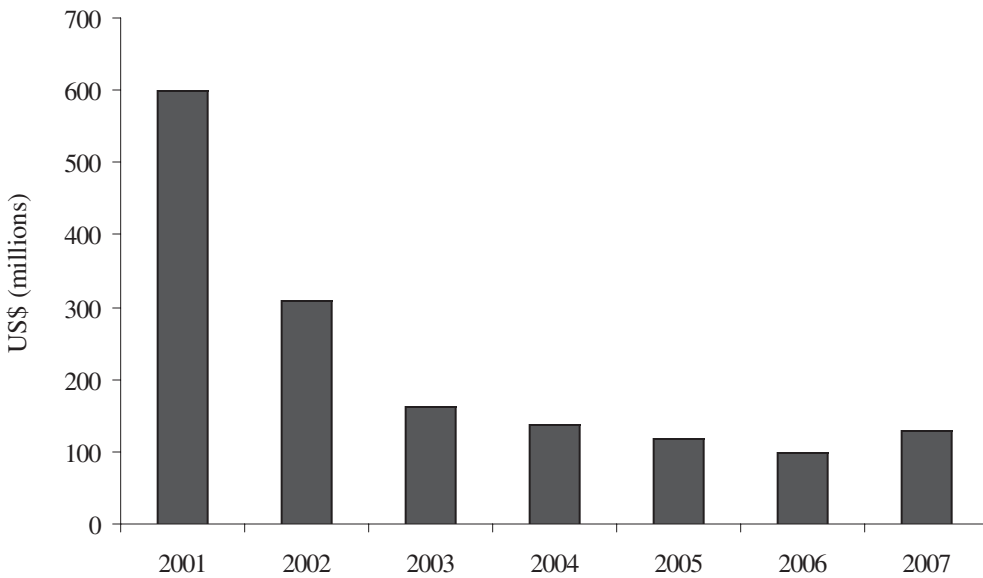
\* Estimate.

**Figure 2**  
**Annual Wheat Production, 1975–2007**



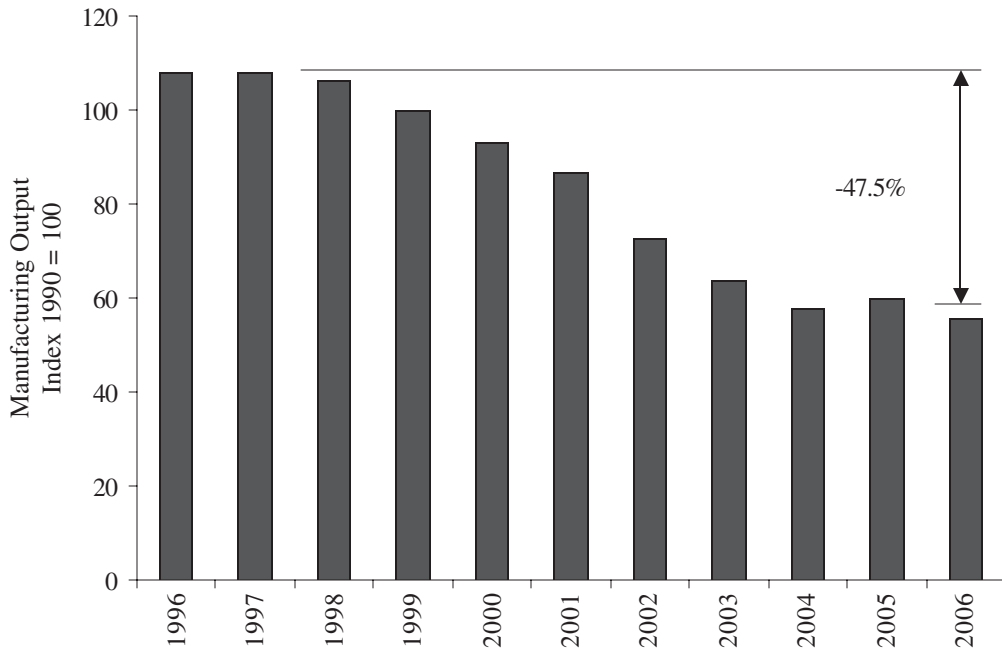
Source: John Robertson, “August 2007 Forecast Paper,” Robertson Economic Information Services for Zimbabwean Statistics, <http://www.economic.co.zw>.

**Figure 3**  
**Annual Earnings from Tobacco, 2001–2007**



Source: John Robertson, “August 2007 Forecast Paper,” Robertson Economic Information Services for Zimbabwean Statistics, <http://www.economic.co.zw>.

**Figure 4**  
**Manufacturing Performance, 1996–2006**



Source: John Robertson, “August 2007 Forecast Paper,” Robertson Economic Information Services for Zimbabwean Statistics, <http://www.economic.co.zw>.

Since 2005, government policies have further hurt the manufacturing sector. Particularly damaging is a law that requires exporters to sell up to 30 percent of their foreign exchange earnings to Zimbabwe’s Reserve Bank at an artificial exchange rate that is a fraction of the real market rate. Members of the ruling regime and their associates have become rich by buying up foreign currency at the official exchange rate and then selling it at the black-market rate, pocketing the difference.

The final blow to the manufacturing sector has come from the government’s price control policy announced at the end of June 2007. In an effort to stem runaway inflation, the government announced halving all prices. In the six months that followed, manufacturing output fell by more than 50 percent and, unless they could export their goods, many manufacturing firms had to shut down.<sup>4</sup>

Blessed with some of the best mineral reserves in the world, Zimbabwe has vast deposits of iron, nickel, platinum, coal, chrome, asbestos, diamonds, tantalite, coal-

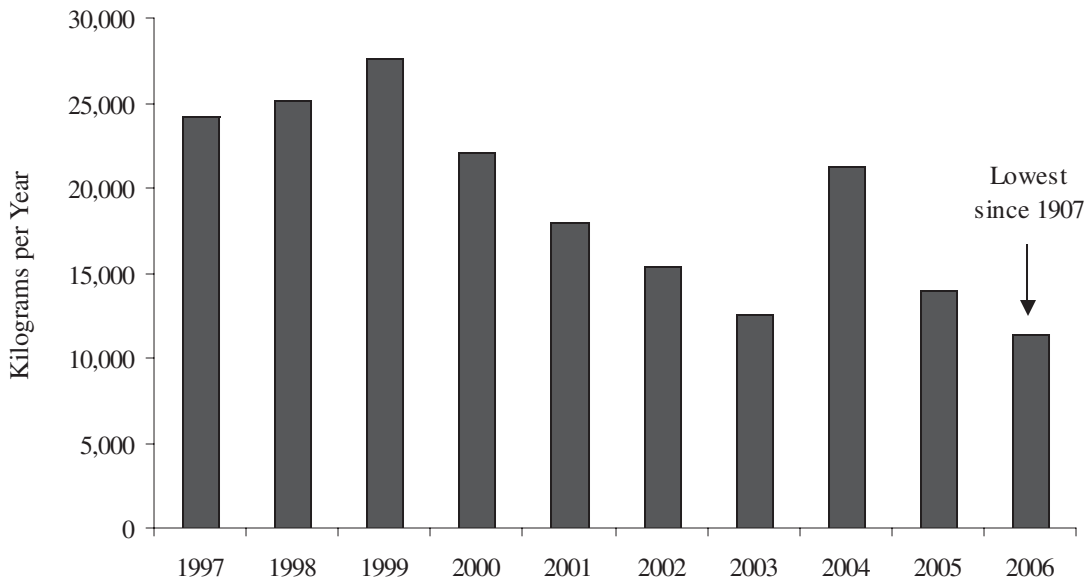
bed methane, and gold. Yet mining, which should have boomed over the last decade because of global economic expansion in general and China’s hunger for natural resources in particular, has, with the notable exception of platinum, all but collapsed.

Gold is a good example. Zimbabwe has vast reserves of gold still stuck beneath its soil. More than 90 percent of those deposits are located in the granite-greenstone terrain that covers about 60 percent of the country. Zimbabwe has more than 6,000 recorded deposits and the capacity to produce at least 25 tons of gold annually. World gold prices have steadily increased over the last decade. Despite that price increase, gold production in Zimbabwe has plummeted in the last decade. In 2006, Zimbabwe suffered its lowest annual output since 1907 (see Figure 5).

As was the case with the manufacturing sector, the government’s decision to force the mining companies to exchange some of their earnings at the official exchange rate undermined gold production. As a result, the sec-

**At the root of Zimbabwe’s problems is a corrupt political elite.**

**Figure 5**  
**Gold Production, 1997–2006**



Source: John Robertson, “August 2007 Forecast Paper,” Robertson Economic Information Services for Zimbabwean Statistics, <http://www.economic.co.zw>.

tor has become unviable. Virtually every other type of mining in Zimbabwe was similarly affected. In 2006, for example, coal production dropped to its lowest level since 1946.<sup>5</sup>

Zimbabwe is a country blessed with natural beauty. In addition to the magnificent Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe also has some of the best game reserves in Africa, stunning mountainous areas, and a wonderful climate. Unfortunately, because of the racist hate speech directed against white people by the ZANU-PF government and the oppressive and often violent political atmosphere, most foreign airlines have stopped flying into the country and tourist arrivals have plummeted. Consequently, annual foreign earnings from tourism in 2006 were less than one-tenth of what they were a decade ago (see Figure 6).

The informal sector of the economy has not been immune from the government’s predations. In May 2005, the government embarked on what it termed “Operation Murambatsvina”—roughly translated as “clean out the filth”—aimed at the urban poor. In the course of two months, the army and the police drove some 700,000 of Zimbabwe’s

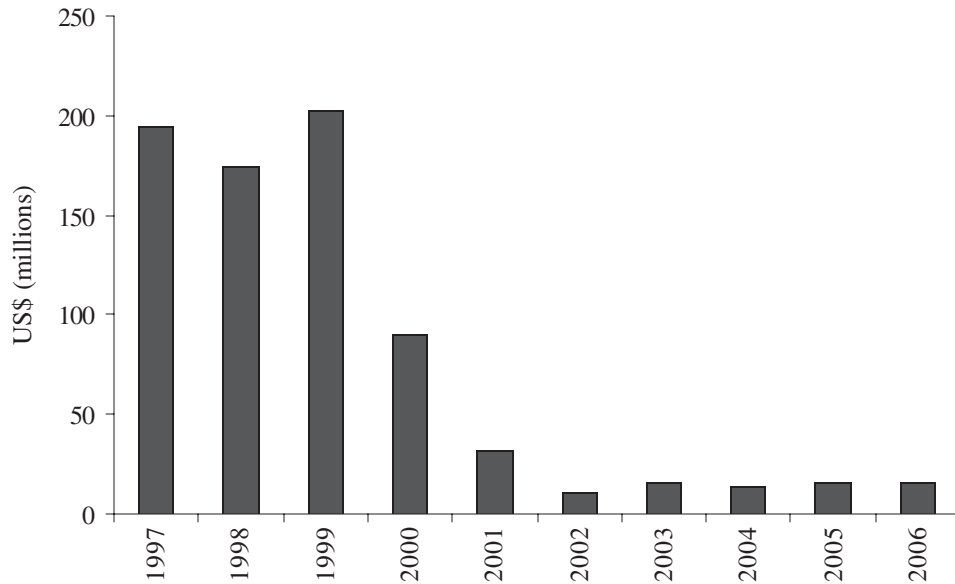
poorest urban-based people out of their homes, depriving them of their livelihoods in the process. As a consequence, the United Nations condemned the government of Zimbabwe.<sup>6</sup>

According to the UN, the informal economy in 1980 was relatively small, accounting for less than 10 percent of the labor force. Its size was partly attributable to various laws and bylaws that prohibited the movement of indigenous people, especially from rural to urban areas. With liberalization of travel, and subsequent economic stagnation and eventual decline after independence, the informal sector share of employment grew to about 20 percent in 1986 and to an estimated 40 percent in 2004. The informal economy had effectively become the main source of income for the majority of Zimbabweans by 2005 when Operation Murambatsvina took place.<sup>7</sup>

In June 2005, nearly 3 million Zimbabweans earned their living through informal-sector employment, supporting another 5 million people, while the formal sector employed only about 1.3 million people.<sup>8</sup> Although Operation Murambatsvina was directed against poor peo-

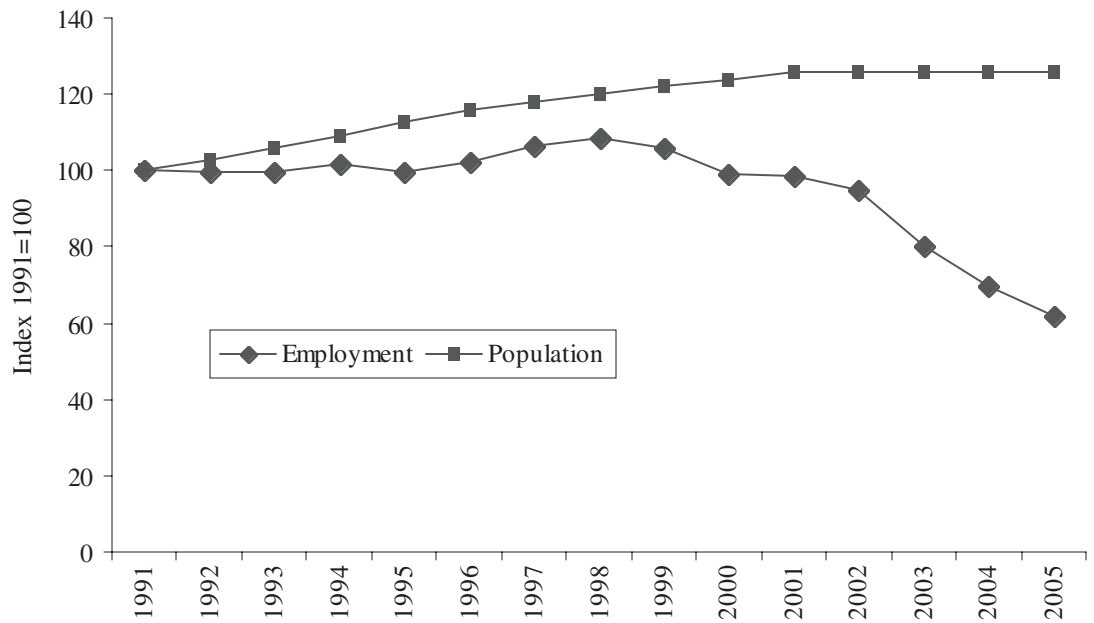
**About 35 years of economic progress have been undone in a decade.**

**Figure 6**  
**Annual Earnings from Tourism, 1997–2006**



Source: John Robertson, “August 2007 Forecast Paper,” Robertson Economic Information Services for Zimbabwean Statistics, <http://www.economic.co.zw>.

**Figure 7**  
**Formal-Sector Employment, 1991–2005**



Source: John Robertson, “August 2007 Forecast Paper,” Robertson Economic Information Services for Zimbabwean Statistics, <http://www.economic.co.zw>.

ple, its effect on the formal economy was also severe. The informal sector of the economy has not yet recovered. Remaining employment in the formal sector is also dropping rapidly (see Figure 7).

## Humanitarian Catastrophe

Zimbabwe's economy is now in a free fall. Inflation, according to official (and thus very conservative) government figures, now exceeds 8,000 percent a year. Respected economists believe that inflation is probably in excess of 150,000 percent a year.<sup>9</sup> To put this figure in perspective, the country with the next-highest inflation rate, Iraq, has a rate of 53 percent a year.<sup>10</sup>

The human cost of Zimbabwe's economic crisis has been catastrophic. Millions of Zimbabweans have left the country, with 3 million fleeing to South Africa alone.<sup>11</sup> Over 80 percent of Zimbabweans remaining in the country are now unemployed. The estimated proportion of the population living below the official poverty line has more than doubled since the mid-1990s and is now over 80 percent.<sup>12</sup> Zimbabwe's human development indicators rank 151st of 177 countries surveyed.<sup>13</sup>

In 2006, the World Health Organization reported that people living in Zimbabwe have one of the lowest life expectancies in the world. Since 1994, the average life expectancy for women in Zimbabwe has fallen from 57 years to 34 years and for men from 54 years to 37 years. The WHO believes that life expectancy rates will continue to fall.<sup>14</sup>

The WHO estimates that some 3,500 Zimbabweans die every week through the deadly combination of HIV/AIDS, poverty, and malnutrition.<sup>15</sup> The estimates of the humanitarian catastrophe in Zimbabwe vary. Richard William Johnson, South African academic and former head of the Helen Suzman Foundation, suggests that between 2 million and 6 million people may have died because of the calamitous economic situation in Zimbabwe since the late 1990s.<sup>16</sup> To put that estimate in a global context, in April 2007, the UN estimated that some

450,000 people may have died as a result of the conflict in Darfur that started in 2003.<sup>17</sup>

Johnson's estimate is in line with the massive discrepancy in the numbers reported by the last two censuses in Zimbabwe. The 1992 census estimated that by the time of the 2002 census, 14 million people should have lived in Zimbabwe. But the August 2002 census found only 11 million in the country—and that finding was before the exodus of Zimbabweans that has occurred since 2002.

Precise data are difficult to gather in a dictatorship suffering from chaos and economic collapse. However, I have been a member of Zimbabwe's parliament since 2000 and have participated in the debates concerning the economic and humanitarian situation in the country. I have had access to information that, because of pervasive censorship in Zimbabwe, is not easily available to others. Consequently, in addition to all the people who have left the country, I am persuaded that at least half a million Zimbabweans have died because of Zimbabwe's economic collapse.

According to findings released in July 2006 by the Zimbabwe Demographic Health Survey, the health of Zimbabwean children has deteriorated dramatically. For example, in 70 percent of Zimbabwe's provinces, more children suffer from stunted growth now than previously. In one province, stunted growth among children increased by 38 percent between 1999 and 2006. The number of children receiving all of the recommended vaccinations dropped by 21 percent between 1999 and 2006. Over the same period, the percentage of children receiving no vaccinations at all rose to 21 percent. The situation has become graver since 2006 because of further economic decline in Zimbabwe. Operation Murambatsvina has no doubt contributed to the increase in general mortality rates. According to the Zimbabwe Department of Health Services preliminary report, a great number of those displaced under that operation were children.<sup>18</sup>

Another problem that Zimbabwe faces is HIV/AIDS. In a report released in June 2006, the UN stated that Zimbabwe has one of the highest incidences of HIV/AIDS in the world.

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Southern Africa is the epicenter of the global HIV/AIDS pandemic. Nine of the 10 countries with the highest levels of HIV/AIDS infection in the world are in southern Africa. Zimbabwe is one of them.<sup>19</sup>

What makes HIV/AIDS particularly serious in Zimbabwe is that the government has dedicated the bulk of its dwindling resources to maintaining its hold on power, leaving little or no money for HIV/AIDS prevention and provision of antiretroviral drugs. Unfortunately, only a tiny fraction of those suffering from HIV/AIDS appears to be on regular courses of medication.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, the ZANU-PF government prefers to spend money on keeping its own people at bay. In the 2006 budget, for example, it earmarked an amount equivalent to 12.5 percent of the total allocation for public health for the Central Intelligence Organization, Zimbabwe's equivalent of the East German Stasi. A subsequent announcement that the government would import new military aircraft from China underscored the government's priorities, even though the country is not at war and is surrounded by friendly states.

Zimbabwe suffers from high levels of malnutrition exacerbated by the government's refusal to acknowledge the extent of the problem. In December 2007, for example, the World Food Program warned that Zimbabwe was one of seven "hotspots" and suggested that some 4.1 million Zimbabweans will need food aid before April 2008.<sup>21</sup> In August 2007, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network<sup>22</sup> stated the following:

Protracted economic decline, exacerbated by a poor 2006/07 harvest as well as current and potential future disruptions of food supply due to recent price controls and eminent restrictions on basic commodity imports have caused a significant decrease in Zimbabwe's food security, especially in the southwest and in urban areas. This year's cereal production is expected to meet only 55 percent of Zimbabwe's requirements,

according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and World Food Programme. . . . [The] WFP [World Food Program] and C-SAFE [Consortium for Southern Africa Food Security Emergency] tentatively plan to import about 352,000 MT [metric tons] of food aid to feed 4.1 million people. While it is conceivable that corn import requirements could be met, the GMB's [Grain Marketing Board's] ability to distribute maize [corn] is a serious concern, as, in the past, GMB distributions have been erratic, and local shortages are common.<sup>23</sup>

Human rights organizations within Zimbabwe believe that the figure of 4 million in need of food aid is an underestimate because of the effect of poverty on so many Zimbabweans who are nominally employed at best. People who previously would have been able to buy food for themselves are no longer able to do so, and millions of urban poor are visibly losing weight. Those people are not included in WFP estimates, however, because of their "nominal" employment.

The Zimbabwean government has deliberately downplayed the extent of the crisis over the last few years. The administration has tried to control the supply of food because by doing so it is able to use food as a political weapon. In that way, it can coerce desperate people, especially in the rural areas, into voting for the ruling ZANU-PF party.

Moreover, acknowledging the full extent of the food shortages would be tantamount to the government's admitting the shortages directly result from its chaotic and corrupt land reform program rather than from bad weather as the government likes to claim. That land reform policy resulted in highly productive farms being rendered unproductive by the government ministers, party operatives, army commanders, and judges who have taken them over.<sup>24</sup>

The government consistently refuses to admit the gravity of the problem, and on various occasions in the last few years it has delib-



erately obstructed the WFP and other humanitarian agencies, preventing them from operating freely in Zimbabwe. In a television interview that he gave in 2004, for example, Mugabe said that Zimbabweans did not want to “choke” on international food aid, which they did not need.<sup>25</sup> The ZANU-PF barred the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from distributing food. The government insisted on controlling all food distribution, a policy that the ZANU-PF continued until it won what was, according to most observers, a rigged March 2005 general election.

Because of the government’s policies over the last few years, millions of Zimbabweans have been deprived of access to the food supplied by international agencies. Given that the ZANU-PF has now announced that it will hold a general election on March 29, 2008, the party will likely use similar tactics to control the supply of food to desperate people.

Never before has one country seen such a convergence of severe economic collapse, high levels of HIV/AIDS infection, and chronic malnutrition. Zimbabweans are suffering from the consequences of the fastest economic contraction anywhere in the world and high AIDS/HIV morbidity exacerbated by the scarcity and widespread shortages of medicine and food.

## Limited International Interest in Zimbabwe

Despite the gravity of the crisis, international interest in Zimbabwe’s agony seems limited. That lack of interest is attributable to a number of factors. First, although more people are dying in Zimbabwe than in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Darfur, Zimbabwe’s mention in the international media is disproportionately smaller—in part because stories about Zimbabwe are more difficult to film and write. The country offers very few stark images likely to capture the world’s attention. A casual visitor to Zimbabwe will not see blood flowing or many children with kwashiorkor bellies.<sup>26</sup> No car bombs explode.

People who die through a combination of HIV/AIDS, poverty, and malnutrition die quietly—they literally fade away. The only way to appreciate the extent of the catastrophe is to visit morgues and cemeteries, which are overflowing. The most poignant evidence of the calamity is found in the dates inscribed on the headstones and plaques in the cemeteries: the vast majority of those being buried are young people and children.

Second, although the foreign media is allowed into Darfur, Afghanistan, and Iraq, it has been generally barred from operating in Zimbabwe. Draconian laws forbid foreign journalists from working in Zimbabwe without permission, which is rarely given. The government routinely detains and prosecutes journalists, and the laws relating to the media prescribe prison terms for those who infringe legal stipulations. Unless the world’s media put the catastrophe at the top of their agendas, however, governments elsewhere will receive little public pressure to take up Zimbabwe as a political cause.

Third, because Zimbabwe has no oil and very few strategic mineral resources, no obvious strategic reason exists why world powers should want to focus their attention on that country’s problems. Although Zimbabwe does have large reserves of platinum, those are not in sufficiently short supply globally to warrant special attention from the international community. Tragically for Zimbabweans, the only interest that the country’s platinum has aroused internationally is that of the Chinese, who have proved to be quite ready to prop up Mugabe’s regime to secure privileged access to the mineral.

Fourth, the response of most southern African governments and the Southern African Development Community to the catastrophe unfolding on their doorstep is best described as a state of denial or paralysis. Until the African governments act, the rest of the international community can do little to help Zimbabwe.

The humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe has spiraled out of control and there does not appear to be any international political will to deal with it decisively and urgently. Many gov-

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ernments, including some southern African governments, simply do not know what to do and are exasperated by the seemingly intractable problem. To provide an effective prescription for Zimbabwe's humanitarian and economic ills, however, one must appreciate the root causes of the disaster.

## **Political Roots of the Current Crisis**

Zimbabwe's humanitarian and economic crises are rooted in politics. The ZANU-PF government has been at pains to blame economic collapse on the combination of Western sanctions and drought. Neither of those was the main cause of the problems that the country faces. Targeted sanctions imposed on top government officials by the West only came into effect in 2002—some five years after Zimbabwe's economic collapse began.

Zimbabweans have had to endure sanctions before. The UN imposed an international trade embargo on the white minority government of Rhodesia in 1966. Fourteen years later, the Zimbabwean economy emerged from the sanctions with one of the largest economies in Africa and a currency that was stronger than the U.S. dollar—even though the sanctions were far more comprehensive in scope than those currently in place. Although the U.S. Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act, for example, obliges the U.S. government to vote against the extension of any loans by international financial institutions to Zimbabwe, no general trade sanctions are currently in place, nor are any likely in the foreseeable future.

Likewise, as Professor Craig J. Richardson of Salem College pointed out, the historically close relationship between rainfall and GDP growth ended in 2000—the first year of the land reforms. The years after 2000 showed above-average or average rainfall even as the economy continued to plummet.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the government cannot credibly blame bad weather for the country's dismal economic situation.

The root of Zimbabwe's woes is the absence of liberal democracy. In *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen stresses the connection between political freedom and the absence of famine.<sup>28</sup> He makes the point that no country with a free press has ever had a famine in its recorded history, and he claims that a free press and an active opposition constitute the best early warning system a country threatened by famine can have. The situation in Zimbabwe supports Sen's analysis.

### **Undermining Political Freedom (1980–97)**

Three pivotal historical issues are directly responsible for the failure of Zimbabwe's democratic institutions and its calamitous consequences.

First, consider the constitution agreed to at the Lancaster House conference that paved the way for Zimbabwean independence in 1980. It was a compromise document, primarily designed to put an end to a bloody civil war. It perpetuated many oppressive aspects of white minority rule—including tight state control over the media. Crucially, it reinforced excessive executive power and resulted in a relatively weak legislature and judiciary. Although racial discrimination was abolished, in many other respects the new Zimbabwe African National Union government from the very beginning exercised the same authoritarian powers as had its predecessor, the white Rhodesian Front. The ZANU exercised those powers with Western knowledge and support. Thus, the Lancaster House constitution created the template for authoritarian rule and allowed Robert Mugabe and the ZANU-PF to consolidate and later to monopolize power.

In addition, the Lancaster House agreement did not address the fact that atrocities had been committed by both the Rhodesian security forces and the guerillas of the two Black Nationalist armies during the liberation struggle waged from 1973 to the end of 1979. It also did not adequately address the human rights abuses, including racial discrimination

suffered by black Zimbabweans under successive white minority governments.

Unlike the agreement that brought an end to apartheid in South Africa in 1994, the Lancaster House agreement did not attempt to address issues of reconciliation and justice. Although no peace deal is perfect, the omission of reconciliation and justice meant that many of those responsible for serious human rights violations on both sides of the 1970s conflict remained in the armed forces and have been responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and other human rights violations perpetrated in the 1980s and, again, since 2000.

Second, consider the “Gukurahundi” episode. Soon after taking power in April 1980, Mugabe had engaged in secret negotiations with the North Korean dictator Kim Il Sung to create an army unit specifically designed to deal with “internal dissent.” Those negotiations culminated in an agreement under whose terms the North Koreans would train and arm a new brigade to deal with domestic “malcontents.” The new brigade came to be known as the 5th Brigade or “Gukurahundi Brigade.”<sup>29</sup>

In January 1983 Mugabe’s government sent the Gukurahundi into Matabeleland, where the soldiers proceeded to murder approximately 20,000 civilians. Nationalist leader and later vice president of Zimbabwe Joshua Nkomo first used this figure in 1984. Human rights organizations accepted it as being, if anything, conservative.<sup>30</sup>

By March 1983, Western governments and NGOs were aware of the grave human rights abuses and crimes against humanity perpetrated by the ZANU government under the leadership of Mugabe, if not the full extent of the genocide.<sup>31</sup> Despite the knowledge of those grave crimes, the West turned a blind eye. In fact, Western governments continued to send aid to Zimbabwe, and Western universities continued to award Mugabe honorary degrees. Adding insult to injury, the British government knighted Mugabe in 1994.

The failure of the West to act against the ZANU and later the ZANU-PF government, or

even to condemn the atrocities, created a sense of impunity in the minds of the ZANU-PF leadership. That sense of impunity had a direct bearing on the events of the last few years. The ZANU-PF regime not only got away with genocide in the 1980s but also was actually rewarded in the years that followed through the continued infusion of substantial aid and other awards. In that context, the ZANU-PF leadership not surprisingly believed that it could act with complete freedom when it commenced its violent land reform program in 2000.

Similarly, although its policies are indefensible, the ZANU-PF perception of the West’s reaction to its policies since 2000 as racist is understandable. As the ZANU-PF apparatchiks see it, the West ignored the massacre of thousands of black Zimbabweans in the 1980s but imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe following the killing of a handful of white farmers and a few hundred opposition activists since 2000.

Tragically, the Gukurahundi episode still haunts the entire nation and is pivotal to understanding what motivates the ZANU-PF government and Mugabe today. Mugabe is in possession of two critically important pieces of intelligence that undoubtedly influence his thinking. First, only he and his immediate circle, including the current military commanders, know precisely what their role in Gukurahundi was. They also know that the loss of power will follow the full revelation of their involvement and culpability. Second, because of their unique access to present streams of intelligence through the all-pervasive Central Intelligence Organization, Mugabe and his military commanders know the depth of anger still simmering just beneath the surface in the communities that suffered under Gukurahundi.

Moreover, Mugabe is undoubtedly aware of how Charles Taylor of Liberia and other despots have been treated in recent years after they lost power. He must be fully aware that the moment he loses power and with it his presidential immunity from prosecution, people will push to have him and the responsible military commanders and politicians

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indicted for crimes against humanity or genocide.

Because of that threat to his personal freedom, his loss of power is anathema not only to Mugabe personally but also, importantly, to a key circle of military and political leaders who are equally culpable for Gukurahundi. In their minds, they cannot compromise because the consequences of the loss of power are unthinkable. To understand the Zimbabwean crisis, then, one must assume that Mugabe and his inner circle will do whatever is necessary to retain power.

Furthermore, that common fear acts as a powerful bond uniting all those responsible for Gukurahundi. Thus, the Zimbabwean crisis must be distinguished from, for example, the final years in power of Daniel arap Moi of Kenya. In many countries throughout the world, the trappings of office become addictive and politicians have to be prized away from office. But Moi never feared ending up in the International Court of Justice in the Hague and so, although he lost the trappings of office, he had nothing else to fear. While Mugabe undoubtedly enjoys the trappings of his office, the biggest obstacle to change is the collective fear felt by the ruling elite of the consequences of losing political power.

Third, consider the failure of the Economic Structural Adjustment Program. The collapse of the Soviet bloc and the end of apartheid in the early 1990s saw the ZANU-PF lose some of its leverage over the West. The need to keep Zimbabwe out of the Soviet sphere of influence and the need to use the Zimbabwean “reconciliation” experience to allay white South African fears regarding postapartheid South Africa no doubt greatly influenced Western foreign policy toward Zimbabwe in the 1980s—especially with regard to ignoring Gukurahundi and the ZANU-PF’s authoritarian inclinations.

With those Western fears removed, however, the ZANU-PF became more vulnerable to Western criticism and declining Western aid. At the same time, the Zimbabwean economy was faltering and with the postindependence honeymoon definitively over, the

ZANU-PF government faced growing opposition from trade unions and student organizations. The Zimbabwean government had to do something to bolster the economy.

In that context, the ZANU-PF government embraced the International Monetary Fund’s Economic Structural Adjustment Program. In 1992, the IMF made the first disbursement of US\$216 million. Further amounts of US\$65 million, US\$76 million, and US\$75 million followed in 1993, 1994, and 1995.<sup>32</sup> The stated goal of those loans was the liberalization of the Zimbabwean economy, which I saw as a possible prelude to political liberalization in the country:

Economic liberalization and political protectionism are incompatible.

It goes without saying that trade liberalization and structural adjustment cannot work in a vacuum. The experience of the world is that genuine democracies have the strongest economies. Economic liberalization will not work in Zimbabwe unless government abandons its policy of political protectionism. I need to stress that I am not saying that economic liberalization will not work in Zimbabwe. I am simply saying that unless government is encouraged to bring about genuine democracy in Zimbabwe and liberalize the political environment, the long-term economic outlook for Zimbabwe will be bleak. . . . Without the free flow of information, even if controls in the economy are relaxed corruption will continue to flourish. Corruption can only be stifled if there is a free flow of information, through ongoing investigative reporting which exposes corruption. I believe that corruption is an epidemic which if allowed to continue will undermine the entire economy, and it is therefore imperative, if trade liberalization is to work, that it be brought under control. . . . The history of Africa and other developing countries shows that undemocratic Governments are inevitably followed by increased corruption, increased infla-

**The response of most African governments is best described as a state of denial or paralysis.**

tion and eventual economic decline. The only people who flourish are the Government Ministers, the externally based shareholders of multi-nationals and the privileged few Chief Executives of locally based companies who have managed to illegally obtain foreign currency. Because of this I believe that if we are genuinely interested in a future in Zimbabwe and a sound economic outlook we need to take a serious long term view and consider what we as business people can do to ensure that economic liberalization is accompanied by political liberalization. . . . I believe that unless these points are seriously considered . . . a bright economic future in Zimbabwe will at the least be severely retarded if not reversed completely.<sup>33</sup>

The initial moves toward liberalization of the Zimbabwean economy in the 1990s were reversed to the point where Zimbabwe today is the least free of the 141 economies around the world measured by the Fraser Institute's *Economic Freedom of the World* report. The political atmosphere in the country has also become progressively more repressive. The funds it received from the international financial institutions partly enabled the ZANU-PF to consolidate power. Furthermore, the foreign aid money that flowed to the political and business elite created a more obvious economic gulf between the ruling elite and its supporters—in particular the veterans of the Rhodesian civil war. The creation of that gulf was to have serious repercussions.

### **1997: The Point of No Return**

In 1997, three events occurred that set the stage for the current crisis. First, the war veterans loyal to the ZANU-PF became increasingly disgruntled with the widening wealth gap between themselves and the ruling elite. In an effort to placate them, Mugabe agreed to pay huge pensions and other benefits. Second, in an effort to protect mining investments made by the members of the Zimbabwean ruling elite in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mugabe

ordered the costly deployment of thousands of Zimbabwean troops to the DRC to prop up the regime of Laurent Kabila. Third, toward the end of the year, the government finally moved on its threat to acquire vast tracts of land held by white commercial farmers.

The combination of those three events led to the dramatic crash of the Zimbabwean dollar in November 1997 and to the beginning of the Zimbabwean economy's downward spiral. That, in turn, spurred trade unions and civil society to create a broad-based political opposition that culminated in the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change in September 1999. For the first time since the demise of Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union in December 1987, the ZANU-PF faced real political opposition.

The ZANU-PF government had built up an elaborate façade of democracy over many years. Moreover, much of the international community saw Mugabe as an icon of liberation. The façade of democracy and Mugabe's stature came crashing down in the aftermath of a 2000 referendum on a new constitution that Mugabe proposed and lost. Appearing on national television shortly after the result was announced, Mugabe said he would accept the result, but he was clearly shocked and apoplectic. He soon turned on his opponents.

The benefit of hindsight has now clarified that the ZANU-PF dramatically underestimated the civic body that coordinated the "No" vote—the National Constitutional Assembly. The government assumed that the NCA only held sway in the country's urban areas, where a minority of the electorate resided. The ZANU-PF was shocked to realize that some 500,000 commercial agricultural laborers had overwhelmingly voted "No." With a general election scheduled for April 2000, the ZANU-PF was suddenly thrown into disarray because it faced the real prospect of losing that election and its power. Furthermore, the success of the NCA in winning the vote gave a huge boost to the newly formed MDC.

### **The ZANU-PF Turns on Its Enemies**

Since the 2000 referendum, the ZANU-PF

**Mugabe's  
government sent  
soldiers into  
Matabeleland,  
where they  
proceeded to  
murder approxi-  
mately 20,000  
civilians.**

has systematically torn down the elaborate façade of democracy that it carefully constructed in the first two decades of its rule. In direct response to its sense of vulnerability, the ZANU-PF began to erode civil liberties in Zimbabwe. In doing so, the ZANU-PF has reacted rather than acting in accordance with a deliberate, well-calculated plan. The only underlying goal of the new policies was to hold onto power. The ZANU-PF has achieved that goal with two broad tactics. First, it attacked whatever institution it deemed to support the opposition. Second, it maintained its core support through the confiscation and redistribution of privately owned assets.

The ZANU-PF set out to break the opposition's ability to organize and mobilize the huge swing vote of the commercial agricultural workers. Recognizing that the urban vote was a lost cause, the party felt it could still win elections if all rural voters supported it because the majority of voters were in the rural areas. However, in the referendum, farm workers and agricultural employers had joined forces to vote against the government. If they were allowed to do so in the parliamentary elections, they would tip the balance in favor of the opposition.

Accordingly, Mugabe postponed the elections scheduled for April 2000, and the ZANU-PF began to systematically disrupt the opposition's ability to organize in commercial farming areas. Almost overnight, the ZANU-PF supporters—spearheaded by war veterans and coordinated by the military—started invading privately held farms. Initially, the ZANU-PF harassed the farm workers, but when that action failed to break the opposition's ability to organize, Mugabe's forces gradually notched up the violence against the opposition. In early April 2000, Mugabe's thugs killed the first opposition activists and later that month they killed the first white farmers. The first two murders of white farmers, chillingly well and gruesomely executed, struck fear into the hearts and minds of the farming community. By the time the election was finally held in June 2000, support had waned for the opposition in the rural areas.

Although the opposition swept the board in the urban areas, on average obtaining over 75 percent of the vote, the ZANU-PF narrowly won the election, securing 62 of the 120 seats contested.

In the latter half of 2000, both the opposition and the Commercial Farmers Union turned to the courts for redress. The opposition filed more than 30 electoral challenges to seats won by the ZANU-PF. The CFU obtained a landmark judgment in the Supreme Court that challenged the legality of the government's land reform program. In 2001, the government responded by turning its attention to the judiciary. By mid-2001, Chief Justice Antony Gubbay, who was threatened with physical violence, resigned. Mugabe replaced him with a judge sympathetic to the government. The original judgment obtained by the CFU was reversed, and the newly constituted Supreme Court rubber-stamped the government's blatantly unlawful land reform program. During the same period, parliament passed two laws—the Rural Land Occupiers (Protection from Eviction) Act and the Land Acquisition Amendment Act—giving “legal” cover to illegal occupation of farms.<sup>34</sup>

During 2001, the ZANU-PF systematically undermined the independence of the judiciary. That activity led to a delay in the adjudication of the electoral challenges brought by the opposition and ensured that the ZANU-PF candidates, who had won illegally, did not lose their seats. In the immediate run-up to the 2002 presidential election, the ZANU-PF turned its attention back to the opposition MDC. In November 2001, police detained several MDC leaders and activists on trumped-up charges. The government passed three new parliamentary acts immediately before the March 2002 presidential election. The Public Order and Security Act hindered the opposition's ability to organize meetings, and the General Laws Amendment Act facilitated rigging of the election. The Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) intimidated the independent print media, enabling the government to shut it down if necessary.<sup>35</sup>

At the same time, the government brought in senior army officers to manage the electoral process. Shortly before the election, the senior army officers held a press conference saying that they would not serve under the opposition presidential candidate Morgan Tsvangirai. Finally, a few weeks before the election, the government arrested Tsvangirai on treason charges.

According to the official results, Mugabe won the 2002 poll by 418,809 votes. The election was marred by numerous irregularities and condemned by a wide variety of international organizations and governments. A subsequent audit of the electoral materials revealed massive irregularities and pointed to Mugabe's having lost the election—albeit by a narrow margin.<sup>36</sup>

Just as the 2000 referendum result came as a shock to the ZANU-PF, so did the 2002 presidential election result. For two years prior to the presidential election, the repressive apparatus of the state had murdered, tortured, and intimidated the opposition. The government disrupted the commercial farm workers' organization and intimidated the farm owners into withdrawing their support for the MDC. Nevertheless, the opposition's support had remained strong. Significantly, although some farmers had been summarily evicted from their farms, the majority of white commercial farmers were still in possession of their farms and producing.

At that juncture the ZANU-PF decided it needed to do more to remain in power. Although no serious political commentator would dispute the obvious historical inequities in landholdings and the need to redress them, it is doubtful that the ZANU-PF initially intended to destroy commercial agriculture. In statements made between the 1980s and 2001, the ZANU-PF spoke about acquiring 8 million hectares of some 14 million hectares owned by white commercial farmers in 2000. During parliamentary debates regarding the Land Acquisition Act amendments, government ministers repeatedly denied that their intention was to ethnically cleanse Zimbabwe of white commercial farmers. Immediately after the 2002 election, however, the

ZANU-PF realized that as long as a significant number of white commercial farmers remained on the land, the slide in the party's rural support would continue.

In April 2002, the government started systematically to evict farmers throughout the country. A new amendment to the Land Acquisition Act rendered farm owners' continued occupation of farms illegal.<sup>37</sup> In August 2002, the government ordered the police to arrest farmers who still occupied their land and allocated the most productive farms in the country to cabinet ministers, judges, army commanders, and other members of the ZANU-PF elite. Mugabe swept aside any pretence that the land reform program was meant predominantly to address the plight of landless peasants. The ruling elite started cherry-picking the best farms, going as far as to displace the war veterans and peasants who had occupied the farms earlier.

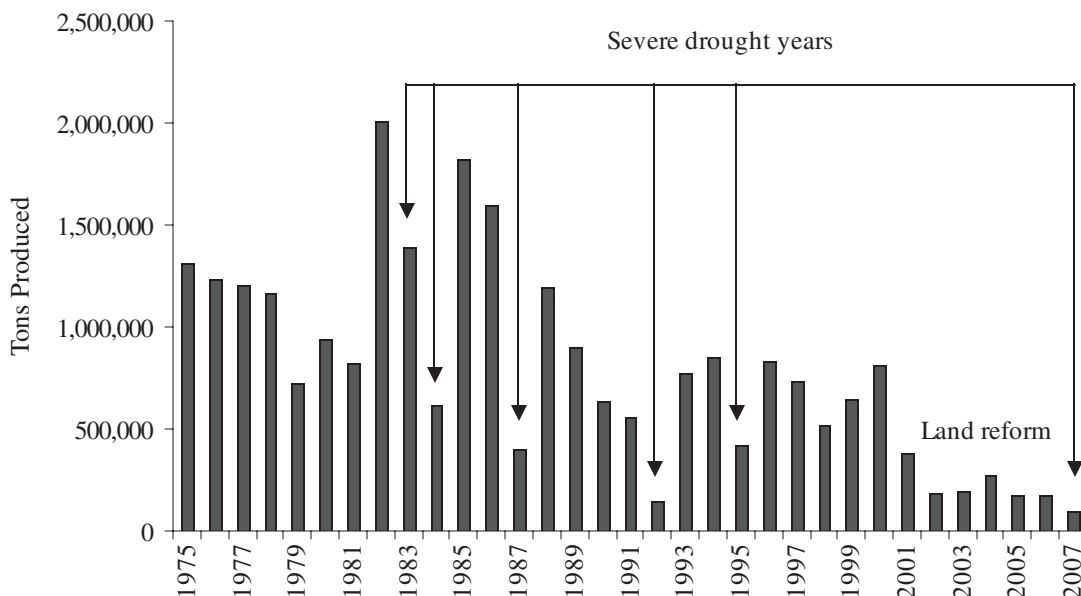
The government's attack on the opposition MDC continued in the courts. Much of the focus against the opposition centered on the treason trials involving Tsvangirai and the MDC secretary general Welshman Ncube that ultimately culminated in their acquittal in November 2004. A March 2004 report showed that 90 percent of the MDC members of parliament (MPs) elected in June 2000 had suffered some human rights violation; 24 percent survived murder attempts and 42 percent had been tortured. State agents murdered three MDC MPs.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the systematic killings, torture, and detention of MDC supporters continued. By the end of 2004, more than 600 MDC supporters had been murdered—often by known state agents. Thousands more had been tortured, assaulted, or otherwise harmed. Since 2000, not a single suspect has been tried let alone convicted for any of those crimes.

In 2003, Mugabe used the AIPPA to eliminate the last remnants of Zimbabwe's free press. In 2001, a bomb destroyed the printing press of an independent newspaper called the *Daily News*. Remarkably, the newspaper managed to continue publishing. In September 2003, however, the government used the AIPPA to revoke

**The moment he loses power Mugabe will be indicted for crimes against humanity.**

**Zimbabwe today is the least free of the 141 economies around the world measured by the *Economic Freedom of the World* report.**

**Figure 8  
Corn Production, 1975–2007**



Source: John Robertson, “August 2007 Forecast Paper,” Robertson Economic Information Services for Zimbabwean Statistics, <http://www.economic.co.zw>.

the license that the paper needed to continue operating.

### Using Food Aid as a Weapon

In the course of 2003 and 2004, the government started to use another weapon—the selective distribution of food. Corn is the staple diet of most Zimbabweans. Farmers of small-scale communal plots who kept most of their crop for their own consumption grew most of the corn in Zimbabwe. Until they were dispossessed under the land reform program, large-scale commercial farmers produced the bulk of the corn marketed through the state-run Grain Marketing Board. Since 2001, Zimbabwe has had to import about a million tons of corn every year to make up for the shortfall (see Figure 8).<sup>39</sup>

As the large-scale growers’ operations were closed down, the loss of business affected the many service suppliers, warehouses, distributors, and workshops that used to operate from all the small farming-area towns. Because most of those businesses were forced to close, the loss of their services has severely affected the small-scale communal farmers as well. The

same business decline undermined all the efforts to make successful farmers of all those who were allocated land under the land reform program.

In 2004, with shortages of the staple food becoming the norm, the ZANU-PF imposed tight controls on the sale and distribution of corn, effectively giving itself control over the distribution of the increasingly scarce commodity. That proved to be a particularly effective political weapon in the run-up to the 2005 parliamentary general election.<sup>40</sup>

Although a few token changes were made to the electoral laws before the 2005 poll, all the main legislative components that enabled the manipulation of the electoral process were maintained. Not surprisingly, whereas the opposition retained all but one of the contested urban seats, it lost ground in the rural areas. Because of the failure of the judicial process following the 2000 and 2002 elections, the opposition did not mount any serious legal challenge to the results.

Despite the government’s many attacks on the opposition, the MDC retained effective control of every urban center after the 2005 election.



Reacting to that election result, the government launched Operation Murambatsvina against the urban poor who formed the core of the opposition's support base. As previously mentioned, the operation rendered some 700,000 people jobless or homeless. In doing so, it dealt the economy another devastating blow.

In August 2005 the government sealed the fate of white commercial farmers with the passage of Constitutional Amendment no. 17, which removed any remaining right of the commercial farmers to have the courts adjudicate the confiscation of their properties.

### Mugabe's New Enemy: The Economy

The government has compromised the independence of the judiciary, destroyed the productivity of the white commercial farming sector, and weakened the opposition, but now it has a new enemy—the falling economy. Zimbabwe faces skyrocketing inflation and rapidly rising government domestic

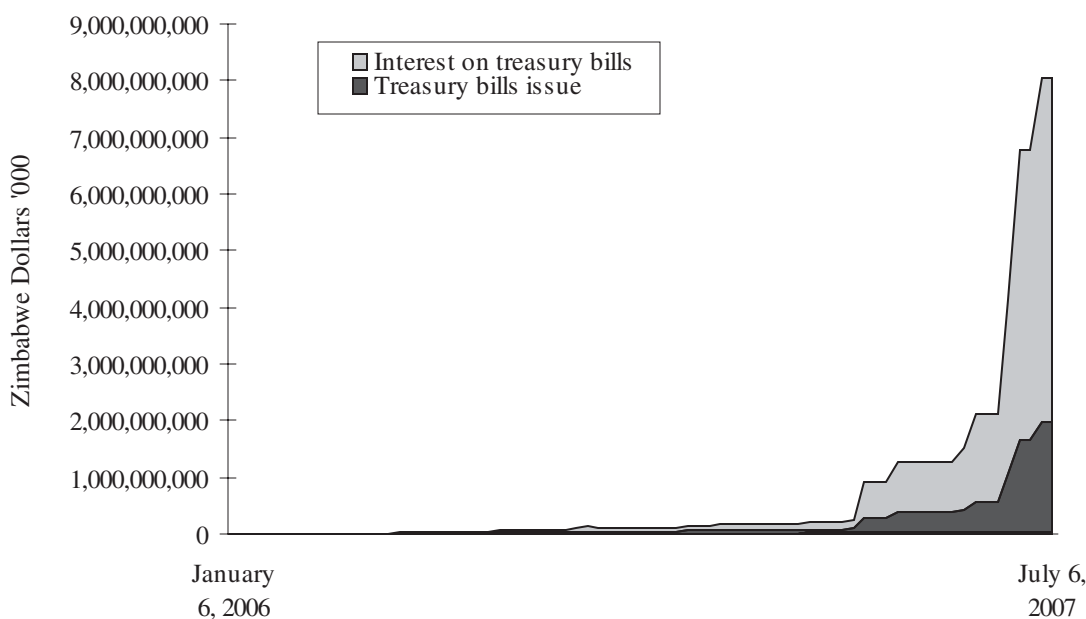
debt. Because the precipitous fall in economic activity during recent years has limited tax revenue, the budget deficit seems certain to rise well above the already unacceptable level of 60 percent of GDP.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Figure 9 shows the recent explosion of the government's domestic debt in nominal terms.

Because of the worsening economic situation, the governor of the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, Gideon Gono, proposed a solution in the form of a new "social contract." His intention was to achieve an agreement among business, labor, and government to hold prices, wages, and government spending constant. They reached agreement on June 1, 2007, but a mere two weeks later a huge spike in inflation caused the agreement to fall apart (see Figure 10).

The government's reaction was to accuse the business sector of being part of a "regime change" agenda sponsored by the West. The government ordered a 50 percent cut in the prices of basic commodities and, backed by militia groups, police launched raids on businesses to ensure that they were complying with the order. Thousands of managers were

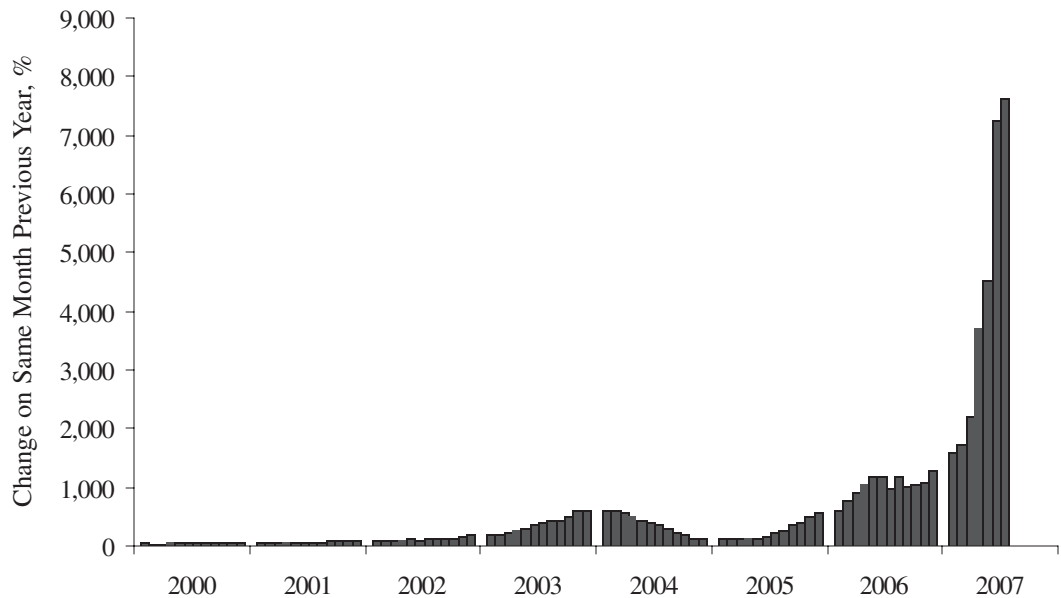
**The funds it received from the international financial institutions partly enabled the ZANU-PF to consolidate power.**

**Figure 9**  
**Government Domestic Debt, January 6, 2006–July 6, 2007**



Source: John Robertson, "August 2007 Forecast Paper," Robertson Economic Information Services for Zimbabwean Statistics, <http://www.economic.co.zw>.

**Figure 10**  
**Inflation, 2000–2007**



Source: John Robertson, “August 2007 Forecast Paper,” Robertson Economic Information Services for Zimbabwean Statistics, <http://www.economic.co.zw>.

**By the end of 2004, more than 600 MDC supporters had been murdered—often by known state agents.**

detained countrywide. At the same time, in a practice reminiscent of the farm invasions, the army, police, and ZANU-PF supporters stormed shops and availed themselves of goods worth billions of Zimbabwean dollars. Inevitably, supplies have dried up,<sup>42</sup> rapidly exacerbating the humanitarian crisis with food becoming scarcer than ever.

In November 2007, the parliament passed an Indigenization Bill. Ostensibly, that bill is designed to rectify—27 years after independence—the injustices caused by white colonial rule. The bill, yet to be signed into law by Mugabe, obliges every business to be controlled through a majority shareholding by “indigenous” or nonwhite Zimbabweans. The net effect of this measure will be to ensure that no white person can ever own a business in Zimbabwe again. It will also ensure that no foreign investor can ever control a business in Zimbabwe again.

The bill should be viewed as a measure designed to ensure that largely urban-based businesses, which have generally supported the opposition, are transferred into the con-

trol of people more sympathetic to the government. If the land reform program is any indication, the ZANU-PF will also use the Indigenization Bill to reward its supporters. Just as the main beneficiaries of the land reform program have been the ruling elite, lucrative white and foreign-controlled businesses are likely to end up in the hands of the ruling elite. Moreover, one can reasonably assume that the new owners of those businesses will run them down as badly as they did the formerly highly productive farms they have destroyed over the last seven years.

## The Way Forward

The world has rightly laid most of the blame for the Zimbabwean catastrophe at the door of Mugabe and his ZANU-PF government. However, the international community must accept that it is complicit in one respect. International financial institutions and Western aid agencies poured billions of U.S. dollars into Zimbabwe. There is very little to show for all that money in

Zimbabwe today. The truth is that the ZANU-PF used much of that money to consolidate power and to suppress its subjects. At the same time, the international community, especially other African countries, ignored very serious deficiencies in governance and in so doing assisted in the perpetuation of the culture of impunity and violence that has plagued Zimbabwean society for so long.

The humanitarian and economic crises are so severe now that a danger exists that the international community will again act expediently without helping Zimbabweans address the root causes of Zimbabwe's malaise. As calamitous as the situation is, Zimbabwe remains a country with enormous potential, but she will never reach that potential unless Zimbabweans make some difficult decisions and agree to respect certain fundamental principles.

Any political settlement brokered by the international community, South Africa in particular, must have certain essential ingredients.

At the root of Zimbabwe's problems is its highly deficient constitution. In particular, the vast disparity of power between the executive, on the one hand, and the legislature and the judiciary, on the other hand, has contributed to the gross abuses that have destroyed Zimbabwe. A new democratic constitution must be agreed to through a process embraced by all Zimbabweans. That constitution must balance power among the three arms of government and ensure that the independence of the media is greatly strengthened. It must also create new institutions to support democracy, such as an independent electoral commission. When the new constitution has been legislated and the institutions mentioned have been established, any international aid should help strengthen those institutions.

The current constitution has enabled the Zimbabwean government to become all-pervasive. Its tentacles extend into every aspect of society and indeed the notion of a large government that meddles in every aspect of Zimbabweans' lives has become a part of Zimbabwean culture. As has been vividly demonstrated in the last few months in the context of the price controls, gov-

ernment's involvement in the operation of every business, school, university, and sporting institution has had deleterious consequences for the Zimbabwean economy. Any new constitution must support Zimbabwe's need for limited government. Outside aid and advice should focus on helping Zimbabwe create a legal and regulatory framework in which the private sector can flourish without unnecessary impediments.

The vast majority of Zimbabweans live in reservoirs of poverty known as communal areas. The people living there have no title to their land, and their material circumstances have greatly deteriorated during the 27 years of the ZANU-PF rule. That arrangement has helped the ruling elite keep those rural Zimbabweans subservient to the government. As Moeletsi Mbeki, the South African commentator, has observed, the fundamental problem facing Africa's development is the enormous power imbalance between the political elite and key private-sector producers. Until the structural powerlessness of producers is addressed, no meaningful development will occur in sub-Saharan Africa. As Mbeki puts it, "It is therefore necessary that peasants, who constitute the core of the private sector in sub-Saharan Africa, become the real owners of their primary asset—land."<sup>43</sup> Zimbabwe is no different. A commitment, therefore, must be made to respect existing title and to extend title to the vast majority of Zimbabweans living in communal areas.

Zimbabwe cannot move forward without addressing its past. Although the fear that Mugabe and the ZANU-PF ruling elite have of future prosecution may be the single biggest obstacle to securing a peaceful transition to democracy, future stability in Zimbabwe will not be assured until the ghosts of the past have been laid to rest. The first necessary step in this process will be the establishment of a Truth Commission that will provide an opportunity for victims to explain what has happened to them over the last several decades. Such a commission must also allow them to say what measures they believe are necessary to achieve meaningful justice and reconciliation in Zimbabwe. It is important that such a Truth Commission go

**Any new constitution must support Zimbabwe's need for limited government.**

**A commitment must be made to respect existing title and to extend title to the vast majority of Zimbabweans.**

back to 1965, when Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front announced its unilateral declaration of independence from Great Britain. Going back that far is necessary, because the deepest roots of Zimbabwe's current problems go back to the time when the intransigence of the white minority government radicalized the Black Nationalist movement, which, in turn, set the stage for the bitter liberation struggle waged in the 1970s.

The sine qua non for the restoration of Zimbabwe's economy and institutions is the return to Zimbabwe of the millions of skilled and educated Zimbabweans who have left the country over the last three decades. Without their skills, the Zimbabwean economy cannot grow to full potential. International humanitarian organizations could help fund the return of these expatriates to Zimbabwe.

### Notes

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20. This conclusion is based on (1) the relatively small budget figure for health; (2) the direct evidence the author has seen in Zimbabwean hospitals, together with numerous reports received from government doctors; (3) the numerous reports in the press over the last few years; (4) the evidence from constituents who report a total lack of access to medication; and (5) a report made to the author by a Médecins Sans Frontières doctor 18 months ago, who estimated that only some 6,000 people

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