

Surviving in Zimbabwe

Interviews with Three

BY JOYCE BROWN AND GLORIA GALLANT

Dans cet article trois femmes du Zimbabwe analysent la crise économique et politique qui sévit dans leur pays. Toutes les trois travaillent (ou travaillaient) avec des communautés à faible revenu sur divers problèmes de justice sociale. Deux de ces femmes dirigeaient une organisation non-gouvernementale (ONG) au Zimbabwe, l'autre, une réfugiée arrivée récemment au Canada travaillait elle aussi pour une ONG jusqu'à son départ précipité de son pays après avoir été menacée de mort.

There have been months of violence and intimidation in the run up to the Presidential election in Zimbabwe, which was held from March 9 to 11, 2002. Mugabe was declared the winner, despite reported evidence of rigging, intimidation of voters, and restricted access to polls in urban areas, where the opposition had most support. Members of the independent media were arrested and the international press was denied entry. The Commonwealth observer group announced that "Mugabe's election did not reflect the will of the people and was held in a climate of fear." (Reuters) The international community is now debating the use of sanctions and efforts have been made to freeze the foreign bank accounts of Mugabe and his Ministers.

Apart from the political instability, Zimbabwe is facing economic crisis, a major drought, and looming food shortages. The economic crisis is due in part to the affects of globalization and free trade, combined with government corruption and mismanagement. Like numerous other countries, Zimbabwe has suffered from the effects of structural adjustment

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policies (SAPS), which forced the government to cut expenditure on education, health care, and social services. Imposed policies of trade liberalization and tariff removal brought in additional foreign goods that have displaced domestic products. There have been plant closures and retrenchment in the private sector as well as in government. Even without the political crisis, Zimbabwe would be struggling to deal with the international policies that put a priority on trade to repay debt. But, the effects of globalization are multi-layered. At the same time as unfavourable trade agreements and structural adjustment policies make life more difficult for the poor, opportunities are created for corruption—for some leaders to amass private fortunes and hold these fortunes abroad.

Background

The current outbreak of violence in Zimbabwe has a long history. The

Zimbabwean people suffered many years of colonial rule, beginning in 1890 when Cecil Rhodes and his "pioneer column" marched into the territories of first the Ndebele and later the Shona peoples in southern Africa. White administrators and officials ruled the country, which became known as Rhodesia, for 90 years. They implemented a series of racist and repressive laws which affected virtually every aspect of African life. Africans were limited in where they could live, work, and attend school as well as where and how they could sell their grain and produce. Hundreds of thousands of people were forcibly relocated from their fertile land to reserves which tended to be in the most unproductive areas of the country. Entire communities were destroyed. African males were forced to work in the mines or in low-paying jobs in the urban areas, while African women tended to crops and looked after children and the elderly in the rural areas. African demands for equality and independence were brutally opposed by the white minority.

In 1965, Ian Smith, then Prime Minister of the colony of Rhodesia, announced a Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain. Rather than submit to an independence process that would enfranchise the African population, he declared that his white-minority party would rule the black majority. This resulted in years of guerilla warfare between the African independence movement and the Rhodesian government. Finally, a peace agreement was brokered in 1979. Mugabe, a popular leader in the fight for African independence and head of the Zimbabwe African

Grassroots Women Leaders

National Union (ZANU) was elected as President, defeating Joshua Nkomo, leader of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) in the first free elections held in 1980. Nkomo was later made Vice President.

During the first decade after independence, the country made huge economic strides as well as significant gains in health care, education and rural development. Schools were built, literacy increased dramatically, health care improved through the establishment of local clinics and rural development was encouraged. The government did much to rectify the injustices of colonial rule and provide new opportunities for its people.

However, the country was not without internal strife. In 1982, Mugabe accused Joshua Nkomo of being involved in a plot to overthrow the government. Subsequently, the Fifth Brigade, a specially trained army unit, under Mugabe's control, took revenge on the minority Ndebele population (Nkomo's base of support) in the southern part of the country. An estimated 21,000 civilians were killed, while others were imprisoned, raped, or tortured. Peace was finally restored in 1987 and a unity accord was signed between Nkomo and Mugabe. However, the scars from this massacre have not yet healed (Kriger; Dashwood; Bond).

After initial gains, the economy suffered setbacks as a result of drought, falling commodity prices on the world market, escalating interest rates on foreign loans, and lack of investment. In 1990, acceding to pressure from the World Bank and the Zimbabwe business community,

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the government agreed to a structural adjustment package. The conditionalities of this package included: devaluation of the currency, the removal of trade tariffs (allowing foreign goods to displace domestically produced ones), incentives for export (at the expense of domestic food production), and a massive reduction in government expenditure which resulted in retrenchment in the public service and cuts to health care, social services, and education.

The results have been devastating to the poor. At a time when the infection rate of HIV/AIDS is estimated to be 25 per cent, the increasing cost of health care has limited people's access to hospitals and clinics. The removal of food subsidies has affected nutritional standards. Rising school fees have led to declining enrollment, particularly for girl children. There is growing unemployment, in part the result of government and private sector retrenchment (Mlambo).

The land issue has been simmering since independence. At that time, about 6,000 white commercial farmers (under four per cent of the population) owned 46 per cent of the rural land. (The majority of this land was acquired through the forcible displacement of the original African inhabitants.) Between one and one-and-a-half million black workers laboured on these commercial farms. Another four million lived in what were then known as Tribal Trust Lands, many of which were located in arid or semi-arid regions (Stoneman; Nduna; Riddell in Tungamirira).

With international aid, the new government projected that it could acquire a portion of the commercial farms and resettle 162,000 families over a three-year period. However, ten years later only 52,000 families had been resettled, many in areas with poor or marginal land (Stoneman; Nduna; Riddell in Tungamirira).

Various factors contributed to this poor performance. International donors, particularly Great Britain, reneged on their promises to provide funding for the resettlement. The country suffered an economic downturn. Perhaps, most importantly, the political will to address the land issue also dissipated. There were increasing reports of corruption amidst government ministers and bureaucrats, many of whom received commercial farms that were designated for resettlement.

In 2000, in the lead up to the parliamentary elections (a separate process from the Presidential elections), "war veterans" (people who fought or claimed to have fought in

the 1966-1980 war of independence) terrorized members of the opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), killing between 30 and 40 people. White-owned commercial farms were occupied by the war vets who claimed they were repossessing land that should be resettled. Eight white farmers were killed and thousands of African farmworkers were injured and displaced.

When the activities of the war vets were successfully challenged in court, Mugabe retaliated by replacing a number of high-court judges with ZANU PF supporters. ZANU narrowly won the elections amidst loud protests of rigging and intimidation. While genuine land reform is desperately needed and would be welcomed by the vast majority of the population, critics of Mugabe see the current government-backed land invasions as political currency, the desperate move of a leader attempting to retain power at all costs. (Kiire; Stoneman; Weiner; Cliffe, 1988; Hall; Ranger)

Two weeks prior and again one week after the March 2002 elections, we spoke with three Zimbabwean women, Beth, Barbra and Thandiwe, about their analysis of the current economic and political crisis in their country. All three work (or worked) with low-income or poor communities, on various social justice issues. Two of the women, Barbra Kohlo and Beth Chitekwe-Biti manage NGOs in Zimbabwe; the other, Thandiwe, is a refugee, recently arrived in Canada. She too was in a management position in an NGO until her hasty departure from the country (after receiving death threats).

How are women faring in Zimbabwe? What is the role of women in this kind of crisis? How have women's lives changed over the past year?

Beth: I think women have been faring very badly. Violence has been rampant and in some of the high density areas [areas of the city with

extreme overcrowding and high incidences of poverty] people are force-marched to ZANU PF rallies. Recently I was in Dzivarasekwa Extension [a squatter settlement on the outskirts of Harare] and was told that on that day people had been in a rally from ten in the morning to 4:00pm. Because of the threat of

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violence people have no choice but to attend. In the rural areas, if your "urban based" children are known to be MDC supporters you are forced to disown them or inform on them for re-education. It think it is easy to say the role of women is to champion for a peaceful election process. This is difficult, as even a conversation between two people discussing politics now requires police permission. Also standing up for what is right has meant reprisals and this has brought a lot of despair. I have heard people say that it is better for ZANU PF to win so we can have peace again.

Economically things have gone from bad to worse. Inflation is currently at an all time high of 117 per cent. Basic foodstuffs are not only out of reach but also out of supply. Maize meal, cooking oil, milk and sugar, if available in supermarkets, has to be rationed. Most women spend their time waiting at supermarkets in the hope they might get a bottle of cooking oil or a packet of

maize meal. The constant feeling of insecurity because of the violence has become a normal state for most women. The AIDS pandemic is still a huge factor with people not only failing to take care of their families but also having to worry about orphans left behind.

Thandiwe: Women suffer the most. They have to feed their families. But women are the least educated. They don't have good jobs so with economic hardships they suffer the most. They go to political rallies to get a bag of mealie-meal [corn or maize-meal—the staple food] to feed their families. Their children are also taken and trained to be political thugs. Who gets raped in the violence? What happens to women with the high rates of AIDS/HIV? During this period, men have also lost their jobs. The domestic burden falls on women, men become aggressive and domestic violence has risen.

How has your life changed and that of your family—both personally and politically?

Barbra: There is so much uncertainty that it makes it very difficult to think long-term. The situation keeps deteriorating. You feel very helpless worrying about what will happen next. More and more people depend on you. If I get mealie-meal in Harare then I have to send it to my family in the rural areas, about 350 kilometres away. It is very difficult to move around. There are roadblocks patrolled by party youths [ZANU PF]. The maize I send may disappear along the way, taken at the roadblocks. I'm thinking that maybe we should bring my parents to the city until after the elections.

The worst thing now is poverty. We don't have mealie-meal. Women are spending hours queuing for maize. It's pathetic. The supermarkets are virtually empty of basic foods such as sugar and maize. The front page of one of the papers showed pictures of police queuing up inside a shop for maize, while the rest of the people

were forced to wait outside.

We are in the midst of a drought. There were no rains in January or February. The crops are beyond saving. Losing the crops will have a huge impact. Even if it rains now, it will just mean that people have water. There will be no crops until April of next year.

Ruth: I haven't been affected personally by the violence. However, seeing and hearing of people being killed is very difficult. Economically everybody has been affected. Salaries have been eroded and one has to think twice before buying an ordinary item like cheese. What is significant however, is the constant fear and lack of a sense of hope. This has had a very profound affect on me.

Thandiwe had to leave her home and her job in Zimbabwe, a position she had held for ten years. She has just received her Canadian work permit and has begun to look for a job. Her husband has been unable to join her because of Canada's recent changes in visa requirements. (As a result of Sept. 11, Zimbabweans must now have a visa to travel to Canada.)

Thandiwe: Being uprooted from my home and my work. It [the political situation] drastically affected my health. I was scared of being picked up at night by the CID (Central Intelligence Division). My children were scared; they didn't know if I would come home after work. I had to give them numbers of people to call in an emergency—if I didn't come home. There was no strategy, no time to prepare them for the move [to Canada]. I just left with two suitcases for four children and myself. Then we squashed into a one-bedroom apartment when we arrived. It was a big culture shock. The children miss their father who is still in Zimbabwe, their home, and their friends. The education system is so different. One of my daughters was put behind in school because of this.

A year ago I would never have said I would go. My colleagues had to push me to go. They said "look you

are going to die here." I had to make the decision within a week.

Part of me finds it very difficult to adjust. For now, I have to pause and put my kids first.

What about the middle class in Zimbabwe?

Barbra: The restaurants and the shops in the middle-class areas are still operating. The white population and the middle-class black population are still in the shopping malls. Some part of this group is benefiting, making money on foreign currency as if nothing is happening. But a lot of young people are leaving and a lot of white people—farmers and middle-aged professionals.

Does it feel safer in the city than in the rural areas?

Barbra: It feels safer in town but not in the high-density areas. Even in town, there were violent clashes earlier in the week. There was a violent demonstration staged by the ZANU PF Women's League against the British. They hit the MDC offices in town. We got calls from people who warned us not to go into town.

Was it a women's demonstration or were men involved too?

Barbra: There were ZANU PF youth—both male and female—as well as women. The ZANU PF women are having huge demonstrations but they may be coming out because of pressure or fear. If you don't attend, then you may be labeled as MDC and beaten up. You have to have a ZANU PF party card (even if you are MDC) in case you get stopped at the roadblocks. Then they beat you up if you don't have it.

What are female politicians doing from both the MDC and ZANU?

Barbra: There is a complete black-out on MDC activities in the media,

unless the coverage is of something negative. MDC women are not visible. It is hard to say what they are doing.

We are so polarized. People can't discuss even ordinary issues. Women can't speak with one voice, can't come together to speak against the violence. Everything is along party lines.

Beth: Not much honestly. The ZANU PF women for example are actively campaigning for Mugabe but nobody has said anything about the violence or the economy. It is difficult to judge the MDC female politicians, as we never get any information on the MDC in the official broadcasting media. However, of the little that we get in the independent media, it does seem like this election is about men.

How has the current crisis affected your work?

Barbra: The organization [which works on housing issues] has been affected by the violence. No one wants to travel, especially in the rural areas. Even if people come for meetings, they leave early to get home before dark. You have to seek permission from the police for a community meeting [so that it is not thought to be a political meeting]. If not people [the police or the CID] will show up and ask you what you are doing. People travel only when absolutely necessary.

Beth: I am the director of a local NGO working with the urban poor. It has been difficult to get into some communities as any external people have been viewed with suspicion. The communities we work with have been divided and in some instances violence has been meted out on some of the membership.

Can you talk about the impact of market forces and globalization at the local level?

Barbra: In our situation it is very difficult to determine the economic

impacts of global forces because it is complicated by our political situation. We've become a pariah state. We were so dependent on foreign aid. Now there is a huge impact because of the withdrawal of that aid. We have no foreign currency reserves and our dollar is depreciating everyday. Both our external and domestic debts are ballooning. Our goods are not competitive on the world market

Now there will be sanctions from the European Union. Most of the bilateral [government to government] aid agreements have now been cancelled. There is reduced activity in the NGO community. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is trying to put together an aid package but it is not coming out well. The government wants to use it as an opportunity to campaign. The MDC [the opposition] wants non-partisan distribution of aid but the government is saying that the NGOs are not allowed to distribute aid.

Beth: The refusal by the IMF and the World Bank to fund Zimbabwe because of its politics and economic policies has had a serious impact on the Zimbabwean economy. While the Zimbabwean government would like to use this as the sole reason for the economic demise we are in, there is no doubt that some of the [economic] policies have been a huge contributing factor. The late eighties economic policies of structural adjustment have brought about untold suffering. The cutting of government expenditure on social services has left most poor people with no health care or other social services. The failure of the Zimbabwean government to service its debt and the subsequent refusal of the IMF to provide desperately needed balance of payment relief further sunk the Zimbabwean economy.

Thandiwe: The government did a lot at independence. There were a lot of new schools and health clinics. Zimbabwe was one of the leading countries in terms of eradication of illiteracy. But the government went

on spending without saving, increasing our internal and external debt. And there was spending on a big bureaucracy and a lot of international travel. SAPS brought a lot of instability and chaos into people's lives. Having to pay school fees affects girl children the most. Parents had to choose whom to send to school so the girls stayed home to do domestic work. With SAPS you disempower the state. The state has lost much of its role through privatization and decentralization

How does the land issue fit into the current crisis?

Thandiwe: The government didn't take land reform seriously and the British reneged on funding a land reform program after independence. There should have been a concerted effort to gradually integrate subsistence agriculture with the large tobacco farms. But, senior Ministers were given land so then it became difficult to push for redistribution.

Mugabe became interested in the land issue only when the white farmers started supporting the MDC. But the white community also has responsibility for this crisis. On their own, they could have offered up land, established their own process of redistribution. It is a whole combination of factors. Land is a national issue. The way it is being distributed is to temporarily influence the electorate but it is not sustainable. Some people are being settled on land that is not arable.

What should the international community do?

Barbra: Relief aid should come in. People are starving and it will get worse. The bilateral agreements should end, as they are direct government-to-government agreements. But things have gone beyond [other governments] influencing Mugabe. He has said that he doesn't care if other countries pull out with foreign aid. That is the official stamp. "Any-

one can go. Zimbabwe will do it alone."

The international community does need to keep talking about this issue. I was in South Africa a few weeks ago and it seems that their policy of quiet diplomacy will continue. At the same time there is an attitude of don't criticize your brother. The South Africans are worried but they are not sure about Morgan Tsvangirai. But the labour movement in South Africa supports the MDC. They are discussing how they can plan for the upcoming refugee crisis [when people flee Zimbabwe].

There will be serious trouble unless there is a large influx of aid after the elections. It will take a long time for the economy to recover.

Beth: Recently the European Union (EU) pulled its election observers from Zimbabwe as well as instituting "smart sanctions" on the government. In my work, which to a large extent is donor funded, we have had to contend with the fact that most funders are pulling out of Zimbabwe. From where we stand, we often feel these reactions have nothing to do with the ordinary Zimbabwean person who will suffer anyway whether there are sanctions or not. The international community could try and get the situation from the ordinary person's perspective. It could also help by providing information. For example there has been talk of "smart" sanctions. What are these and exactly how will they be implemented? It would be good to know which government officials foreign bank accounts have been frozen.

Thandiwe: The EU action of pulling their monitors out is strong. It is clear that no free and fair elections can be held. The Organization of African Unity (OAU), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Commonwealth should do the same. When you talk about election monitoring, you generally talk about one or two days but it is really a process that should take six months. A team of monitors needs

to work together with civic organizations and create space for voter education.

Sanctions also say that things are not okay. The sanctions should be geared to impact on Mugabe not the ordinary people.

The international community should be trying to find a peaceful solution. It is not only the economic impact; the social fabric of the country has been tampered with. People are being uprooted through land redistribution. People have lost their social supports when they are thrown into new areas with no infrastructure. The issue of HIV/AIDS also needs attention but the country is in denial.

It will be very hard to get foreign investment dollars back in the country. But it will be needed to rebuild the infrastructure, which has been destroyed or neglected over the past two years.

Who do you think will win the elections and what do you think will happen afterwards?

Barbra: I don't think there will be a clear winner. What you see on TV is ZANU PF campaigns. It's very difficult to determine who will win. Both sides have huge crowds at the rallies [although there are many reports of people being forced to attend ZANU rallies or attending out of fear]. Each paper has different survey results as to which party is in the lead. If the MDC wins, Mugabe won't accept it. There may be some level of civil war.

On the other hand, if ZANU wins, there could also be an uprising from MDC supporters. MDC would likely challenge the results in the courts but a low level of violence could result. The army is prepared to counter any violence [from the MDC].

Unless there is a large input of aid after the election, then there will be trouble. It will take a long time for our economy to recover. Our manufacturing base has gone down. There are more and more company closures. We will need an injection of

capital in order to be able to buy spare parts for machinery and to restart industry.

We will have to depend on aid to feed people. Tobacco production (one of the largest exports) is at a very reduced level. As well as the drought, so much land is lying idle because no one is sure who will be allocated land. Some big commercial farms didn't plant anything.

Beth: I am a pessimist. So, while I believe the MDC has the support of the majority of Zimbabweans and thus if the election had been free and fair, they would win, I feel that ZANU has made it impossible for the MDC to win the election. They have invested too much in violence and propaganda to afford to lose the election. I guess I have already partly prepared myself for this scenario and if the situation gets worse I might, like a lot of other Zimbabweans and for the sake of my kids, be forced to emigrate. This for me would be a tragedy, as I truly love my work and my country. There is a small part of me that is hopeful that things will get better.

Thandiwe: ZANU might win because it has used all the state machinery to rig the elections and stop the opposition from campaigning. However, there is also the possibility of people saying "enough is enough" and staging an uprising comparable to that in the Philippines. But I don't think Mugabe will surrender peacefully.

What do you think the solutions are to the current situation?

Barbra: Some mediation process or mechanism has to be put in place first to have either party accept the outcome whatever it may be and to agree on a way forward to get the economy working again. I'm very pessimistic about an uneventful post-election period regardless of which party wins. A ZANU PF win is most likely to result in more sanctions, more isolation and more suffering unless there is a complete turna-

round by the government. An MDC win might result in easing up the isolation and sanctions but I think they might have to make a lot of concessions to the international community, which might not be in the best interest of the country in the long run. However, the interesting question will be the role of civil society.

Beth: For ZANU PF to get out of power, desist from violence, and for the people of Zimbabwe to work on a new progressive constitution that will undo all the harm that has been done in the last two years. But this is not likely to happen. I just feel so sad that all I have to look forward to is more violence and the continued raping of this country. The ZANU PF government has shown they have no regard for basic human rights or for averting a major social and human tragedy.

Comments After the Election

Barbra: The election was something else. It took me 18 hours to cast my vote. I went to the polling station at 7:00am on Saturday and gave up at 8:00pm although my polling station went on until 3:00am Sunday. I went back on Sunday at 5:00pm and only managed to cast my vote at 10:00pm. It was the most stressful and frustrating process but the determination and patience displayed by people on that day was unbelievable. A good number were so frustrated they gave up completely. I was determined to vote.

The atmosphere here and in most towns and cities resembles a funeral. I went to Gweru last Wednesday for a funeral and for the two days I was there, it was just somber, grim. There is this uneasy, tense atmosphere; anger and despair. Rumour has it that ZANU PF is planning to start some witch hunting and massive deprivation of basic commodities for the urban population. If that happens, it will just be the excuse that people are waiting for to let out their anger and frustration. Right now the army and

police are everywhere. In rural areas reprisals have already started.

The result does not augur well for NGOs because we will be subjected to more scrutiny and harassment. Government will not cooperate with the MDC led local authorities and no meaningful development is expected.

As you know, the international community is divided on what measures to take. I don't see the sanctions threat working, but suffer we will. There is no clear program of action to get us out of this mess with Mugabe. In his speeches he talks about focusing on rural development, continued land distribution, controlling government expenditure and revitalizing manufacturing with priority given to the informal sector and Zimbabwean investors, but the hows are missing.

Ruth: Election postscript. My predictions were right but what I was not prepared for is how depressing I find the thought of another six years under ZANU PF rule. What is uplifting though is the amazing spirit that existed as people stood in those long queues to vote. I was in the queue by 4:15 and only managed to cast my vote a good six hours later. People shared water, discussed politics, cultural issues and anything imaginable. It was amazing the hours just passed without you even realizing where the time had gone. People were so determined to vote.

However, reality came with Mugabe's victory and his inaugural speech. Mugabe repeated his imperialistic rhetoric and said there would be a purge on civil servants that do not implement government policies. Then he called for the unity of all Zimbabweans. Thabo Mbeki and Olugusum Obasajo [South African leaders] met with the MDC yesterday to try and get them to talk to ZANU PF. Well-placed sources say they want the two parties to form a government of national unity. I think ZANU PF is running scared because the UK and U.S. are talking of tougher sanctions and the Commonwealth observer mission refused to okay the elec-

tions. The MDC would be crazy to even consider these proposals of unity, as it will be like painting over a crack without properly repairing it. The MDC C is meeting to discuss whether they should even meet ZANU PF but if you heard Mugabe's non-conciliatory stance before the elections, it is very strange that now he wants to talk to the "puppets." Life continues as normally as it can under these circumstances.

Thandiwe [who has spoken to relatives in the southern part of the country]: It's clear I can't go home in the near future. People are overwhelmed by the situation. Police are all around and people are reminded of the period of the Fifth Brigade. Some are going to South Africa to get food but there are restrictions on the amount of food you can bring back across the border. The food situation is serious.

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