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NEWS

Zimbabwe plunging toward total collapse

By Laurie Goering and Tribune foreign correspondent
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BULAWAYO, Zimbabwe — Runaway inflation soon may be brought under control in beleaguered Zimbabwe, but not quite in the way President Robert Mugabe had hoped.

With industry largely shuttered, commercial farms unplanted and this once-rich country's economy collapsing under Mugabe's economic policies, Zimbabwe has run out of money even to print more money.

Buying watermark paper and ink requires foreign currency, and Zimbabwe's coffers are empty. The country can no longer afford to import gasoline, coal to fire its utilities or most other basic needs. Rampaging 300 percent inflation has made prices so high--2,560 Zimbabwe dollars for a gallon of milk, or \$46 at the official exchange rate--that buyers now must tote sacks of cash to the grocery store, and the banks are running out of bills.

The country's opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, called last week for a nationwide work strike and street marches as a "final push" to shove the now-detested 79-year-old president from power. But the strike fizzled after the first few days, and the marches failed to draw crowds, largely because of heavy police and military intimidation and widespread fear.

A growing number of Zimbabweans think that the failing economy, rather than protests and legal challenges, will ultimately bring Mugabe down, and that such a collapse could come within six months if the longtime president is unable to secure more outside economic aid.

Gas: \$180 a gallon

With gasoline prices skyrocketing to \$180 a gallon at the official rate and black-market supplies unreliable, many urban Zimbabwean workers pay nearly half of their monthly salary on bus fare to get to work.

That means "soon we won't even have to call stay-aways," said David Coltart, one of the protest organizers and an opposition parliament member from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city. "People simply won't be able to get to work anymore. Economics will determine it rather than political pressure."

In the past six months, Zimbabwe's struggling economy has plunged into a free fall.

Unemployment is above 70 percent. Forced by the government to sell their products below the cost of production, factories have closed their doors or been shuttered by rolling power outages.

White-owned farms, seized for redistribution to black owners, lie largely fallow due to lack of cash for seeds and fertilizer. Fuel is so scarce that the Zimbabwe Seed Trade Association warned recently that "farmers may be forced to choose between harvesting crops [now in the field] and planting [new] crops. They are obviously unable to do both."

Libya, which in the past year has supplied gasoline to Zimbabwe in exchange for farms and political support, has closed the fuel tap. Only buses and public transport vans line up at the rare open gas stations; private drivers must motor to neighboring Botswana or South Africa to fill their tanks.

In Bulawayo lines instead form at the banks as frustrated depositors try to make withdrawals in cash the banks don't have.

Cargill Cotton, a private company, recently began issuing its own currency, urging in a newspaper ad that the "bearer's checks" it was handing employees "should be treated as cash."

"The country can't function anymore. Everything has collapsed. The institutions can't operate," said Thokozani Khupe, a Movement for Democratic Change parliament member from Makokoba.

That collapse, however, hasn't brought Zimbabweans to the streets. Since the country's rigged 2002 presidential elections, any meeting of more than two people in Zimbabwe has been banned, and protesters have been sprayed with tear gas, beaten, kidnapped and, in some cases, killed.

During the recent labor strike, police and soldiers rounded up merchants at their homes and forced them to open shop doors under threat of arrest and the withdrawal of business licenses. More than 300 political opposition leaders also were arrested, jailed and, in some cases, tortured, MDC officials say. In Bulawayo, military helicopters swept over the city and truckloads of soldiers trolled city streets.

Youths like Vusi Ndlovu, 21, who might elsewhere form the backbone of street marches, say they have seen what happens to friends and neighbors who stand up to Mugabe, who has ruled Zimbabwe since its independence in 1980.

"I'm scared," said Ndlovu, who works at a partially government-owned factory and who went to work last week rather than lose his job. In Zimbabwe, police "hit you instead of using water [cannons] like in other countries."

Archbishop Pius Ncube, a longtime Bulawayo opposition figure, attributes Mugabe's success in clinging to power to a failure by Zimbabwe's neighbors to speak out against the regime's brutality and its violations of democratic principles.

Unity has failings

"They believe as African leaders we should stand in solidarity against the Western world," Ncube said. "Each time we [in Zimbabwe] try to take steps [to pressure Mugabe], African leaders get together and vote in favor of Mugabe. It's a big, big problem."

Just as serious, he said, is the lack of an opposition figure capable of inspiring Zimbabweans to risk their lives for political change. Morgan Tsvangirai, president of the MDC, has been repeatedly arrested and charged with treason, inciting a coup and other crimes under the country's Draconian security laws. Tsvangirai was arrested and charged with treason again Friday because of "the many statements he has been making calling for the violent removal of the president," police spokesman Wayne Bvudzijena said.

But Ncube believes the former union leader, favored in the stolen 2002 elections, has failed to lead Zimbabweans into the streets.

MDC leaders say they believe their best bet of forcing Mugabe's resignation--and new elections in three months, under constitutional rules--is to arrange a barrage of small street protests across the country that will quickly disperse when police and soldiers are trucked in. Such pressure, they hope, will help deplete the government's limited resources of fuel and cash and eventually drive Mugabe toward economic, if not political, surrender.

Drawing crowds to the streets, however, won't be easy. Calls for a major protest march Friday in Bulawayo fizzled when no one showed up and MDC leaders, fearful of being arrested and beaten, failed to take to the streets themselves in the face of a heavy police presence.

That doesn't mean Mugabe can hold on to power through intimidation alone, however, opposition leaders said.

"People may have been deterred now, but it hasn't taken away their anger, and the economic problems remain," Coltart said.

"The situation is unsustainable," he insisted, "and the process of change absolutely irreversible."

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