

Land Of Chains And Hunger

In a harrowing eyewitness account, the author comes face to face with the misery of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe

BY ALEX PERRY

BULAWAYO, ZIMBABWE

A BAD JAIL WASTES A BODY quickly. When I entered Cell 6 at Gwanda police station, I was fit. After five days in a concrete and iron-bar tank, with no food and only a few sips of water, my skin was flaking and my clothes were slipping off. A prison blanket had given me lice. The water I had palmed from a rusty tap in the shower had given me diarrhea. Under a 24-hour strip light, I hadn't slept more than a few minutes at a time. And I stank. So many men had passed through Cell 6 that they had left their smell on the walls, and while I was making my own stink, the walls were also passing theirs onto me.

It took 22 hours to get arrested in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. On March 28, I flew into Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo,

with the intention of reporting on the ruinous policies that have turned Zimbabwe into one of the poorest and most repressive countries in the world. Foreign journalists are routinely refused permission to travel to Zimbabwe, so I entered the country as a tourist and drove south from Bulawayo to the goldfields of the Great Dyke. I was following tens of thousands of Zimbabweans who, as the economy collapsed, headed to the gold-mining region of Matabeleland, hoping the red hills might give up something to live on. My goal was to get a first-hand look at the misery facing ordinary people in Zimbabwe today. But I had little notion of just how close I would get.

TO MAINTAIN MY PRETENSE AS A TOURIST, I would have been safer staying north, near

the game parks and Victoria Falls. But Matabeleland is a microcosm of Zimbabwe's implosion. Thousands in the region are dying of malnutrition. Hundreds of thousands survive by trapping wild animals or bare-handed mining. When I arrived in the gold-rush town of West Nicholson, I met with a local miner in his bungalow. Several times during our 10-minute chat, he would step out for a few moments. It soon became clear why. When I emerged from his house, two plainclothes officers were waiting to detain me.

In the 1980s, Zimbabwe was the second largest economy in southern Africa. Millions of tourists visited each year to see hippos, lions and the awesome drama of Victoria Falls. And Zimbabwe—a nation of 11 million to 13 million people (nobody knows the

precise number, partly because so many have fled) gave black Africans the best education and health care on the continent. But over the past two decades, Mugabe's single-minded protection of his power has devastated the economy and turned the country into a police state. Unemployment is at 80%, living standards are back to their 1953 levels, and the World Health Organization says life expectancy is 34 for women and 37 for men—the lowest in the world. Inflation hit 1,792.9% in February and is predicted to reach 3,700% by year's end. (A currency free fall of that magnitude means, for instance, that in nominal terms, a single brick today costs more than a three-bedroom house with a swimming pool did in 1990.)

Arriving in the country is like touching down the day after a cataclysm—a place

where the clocks have stopped. There are roads but few cars, and roadside railings are torn up at the stumps. The shops feature bare shelves and price boards for imaginary products that are changed three times a day. Telephones don't work, the power is out, and blackened factory stacks spew no smoke. People loll in the streets with nothing to do and nowhere to go, even if there were a way to get there. "What do people eat?" I asked a lawyer I met. "Good question," he replied.

The one thing Zimbabwe is in no danger of running out of is pictures of "Comrade" Robert Gabriel Mugabe. He looks down from framed photographs in every store, gas station and government office, a small man in gold glasses. When I landed in Zimbabwe, he was front-page news in every newspaper, railing against the West, which could "go

Road to nowhere A signpost greets arrivals at the Zambian border near Victoria Falls. As a result of Zimbabwe's devastated economy, there is little traffic in the country. Here, of the few cars on the roads, most carry tourists or Zimbabweans trying to find a way to escape

