



Recent Events in Zimbabwe

James McGee, U.S. Ambassador to Zimbabwe
 Conference call regarding recent events in Zimbabwe
 Washington, DC
 June 13, 2008

MR. GALLEGOS: Good morning, everyone. Thanks for getting on the call. As you've heard, there won't be a gaggle today, nor will there be a briefing. However, I am happy to be able to bring Ambassador James McGee, our Ambassador in Zimbabwe, to speak with you all again about the current situation there. I know you have a lot of questions. Ambassador McGee will give an introduction and then he'll take questions when he's ready. This is on the record. And you can use this audio for airing.

Ambassador McGee.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Thanks, Gonzo. In no particular order, we had several major events in the last week. Why don't I start off with the theft of USG humanitarian food from schoolchildren. This happened on June the 6th in a town called Bambazonke, which is close to Mutare here in Zimbabwe. Catholic Relief Services had hired a truck to carry humanitarian food assistance to 26 different schools. Unfortunately, the truck broke down (inaudible) – fortunately, close to a police station, where the truck driver pulled into the police parking lot and spent the night there getting his truck repaired.

The next morning a group of war veterans led by the Governor of Manicaland, a province where this driver happened to be, of Governor Chugudu came and commandeered the entire truck – 20 metric tons of food destined for hungry schoolchildren – and directed the driver to drive it down the street where they then took the food and gave it to a ZANU-PF political rally. They handed the food out, saying, this is compliments of the Robert Mugabe regime. So the most defenseless, the people who are least able to care for themselves, young children, were being denied food for purely political purposes.

We've made a diplomatic protest from the theft of this food to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We have yet to receive a response from the ministry. And the one thing that the Permanent Secretary, that's surprising to me, he said he had never heard of this place Bambazonke and that he was even uncertain that this incident had ever happened. So that's quite surprising.

We had the return and arrest of Tendai Biti, who is the Secretary General of the Movement for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe. Mr. Biti had been in South Africa and other parts of the world, traveling in support of the upcoming election for about six to seven weeks. He was arrested upon return at the airport and he's been charged with treason. And we've called for Mr. Biti's immediate release. His arrest, along with the arrest of other MDC leaders, including Morgan Tsvangirai's detainment, and the ongoing campaign in violence and intimidation has made a travesty of the upcoming runoff election. We're not quite certain of Mr. Biti's condition. We met with officials from MDC earlier today. He's being held in a police station in the western part of the country. But everyone, including their lawyers, are being denied access to Mr. Biti at the current time.

And finally, let me bring up the suspension of NGO operations here in Zimbabwe. The Minister of Social Welfare Nicholas Goche on the 6th of June issued a statement suspending all NGO humanitarian assistance here in Zimbabwe. Now, this is going to have a major effect on everything that we're trying to do in the NGO community. I've heard estimates of up to four million people potentially being hurt by this suspension with food assistance. We have some very, very large food programs out there. And with the – with the Minister suspending these programs, people are going to be hungry in a very, very short period of time. Zimbabwe had a very, very weak crop this year. Typically we don't see food insecurity kicking in until August. We're expecting to see it as early as late this month or early July. So those were the three big issues that happened this month. We still continue to try to work with the Government of Zimbabwe on these issues with not much success. And I'll be happy to try to answer any questions that you may have now.

OPERATOR: At this time, we'll begin the question-and-answer session. If you'd like to ask a question, please press *1 on your touch-tone phone. If you need to withdraw your request, press *2. One moment, please, for the first question. And our first question comes from Elise Labott. Please state your company name.

QUESTION: I'm with CNN. Thank you. Can you hear me?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Yes, Elise, I can.

QUESTION: Thank you for doing this, Ambassador. There have been some reports that there have been some documents – uncovered that show that the government instructed the police and war veterans to harass the convoy last week. And I was wondering if you could discuss that. And also, I understand, you know, why you stay on the ground in terms of thinking that you can effect change and try and help the people on the ground, but are you getting any cooperation whatsoever with the government or do you consider yourself and your immediate staff in hostile territory? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Elise, we thank you for that question. We have seen these documents. They appear authentic, but we cannot confirm if these were originated by the government or not. So I don't feel confident in saying anything else about that at the current time.

As far as what we're doing here, we are doing our job and nothing more here in Zimbabwe. We are trying to effect a peaceful change. We're trying to help set the climate for free, fair elections here in Zimbabwe. It's a very difficult task, especially when you get the President of this country and one of his vice presidents -- Vice President Msika and President Mugabe -- within the last 24 hours have both made statements that a vote for the opposition is a vote for return to war in Zimbabwe.

The democratic process cannot move forward in a country where you have the sitting president and a sitting vice president making statements like that. It's (inaudible) for anyone to even think that we can have a free and fair election with these types of statements, with the violence and the intimidation that continues to be perpetrated against innocents here in Zimbabwe, and frankly, the suspension of all NGO humanitarian assistance.

The political motivation here is extremely dangerous. We're looking at the situation deteriorating. The people on my staff are very dedicated and, although we've had some, I would say scary moments with the military, the so-called war veterans and the police forces here in Zimbabwe, we're going to continue to go out in the field and try to make a change.

QUESTION: Have you gotten any kind of guarantees of your security from the government? I mean, are they kind of – I know with the food they kind of blew you off. But when you talk about these types of scary moments, are they completely blowing you off or are they saying that they'll try and pay more attention to this kind of thing?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Elise, I think this government will do anything necessary. Anything that it feels is necessary, including the harassment, and maybe even the harm, to diplomats to ensure that they stay in power.

QUESTION: Well, thank you.

OPERATOR: And our next question comes from Charles Wolfson. Please state your affiliation, please.

QUESTION: CBS News. Mr. Ambassador, following up the previous question, can you give us any more details about the extent of contact you have with the government? Any specifics about people that you can get to or cannot get to that you'd like to get to? And also can you tell us about any stronger action the U.S. might be able to take given the situation?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Thanks, Charles. Charles, we've been very fortunate since my arrival here last November in opening quite a few doors to the Government of Zimbabwe, all the way up, and including the President. President – I've met with the President a couple of times. I've had several meetings with key ministers here in Zimbabwe. But starting about three weeks ago that all seemed to change. I've had a very, very difficult time meeting with any of my ministerial contacts. I've asked for a meeting with the President and I've been told that the timing is inopportune for a meeting until after the elections.

We have maintained contact with some people in the government, including some very high-level people in the Government of Zimbabwe, but nothing like what we saw prior to the general election on March the 29th.

QUESTION: And as to any other actions the U.S. might be able to take but hasn't yet moved to, is there anything you're thinking about you'd like to share with us?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: We are assessing what we can do. Right now, we continue to work with our colleagues in the region, the SADC and the African Union. I think the key – and I think I mentioned this last week to this upcoming election -- is that we have as large a number as possible of election observers on the ground. Right now, we have confirmation of somewhere between four and five hundred election observers from SADC, and maybe upwards of seventy or eighty from the African Union that have committed to coming here to observe these elections. These observers need to be on the ground as rapidly as possible, out in the countryside, doing two things: Number one, demonstrating to the people of Zimbabwe that they're going to be protected, that they're working to end the violence in this country. And number two, that the people's vote will be protected. And again, the larger number of election observers that we can get out in the field, the better chance of this happening, the better chance of us having free and fair elections in this country.

Additionally, I think that the United States Government is continuing to look at all of its options on how to deal with this situation here. But as I mentioned earlier, this government absolutely does not care. They could care less what we or anyone else thinks of them. And they will continue to do everything that they can to win this election and continue in power.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: And our next question comes from Donna Bryson. Please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: From Associated Press. Mr. Ambassador, if you could tell us any more about Mr. Biti's whereabouts. The MDC is saying they're having a hard time tracking him down, but it sounds like you guys have at least found which jail he's in. Can you tell us exactly where and anything you know about his condition?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Okay. We just had a meeting with a very high ranking MDC official who tells us that he is being held in the western part of this country –

PARTICIPANT: Harare.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Tarare?

PARTICIPANT: Harare. He's in Harare.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Harare.

PARTICIPANT: (Inaudible) of Harare.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Oh, I'm sorry, he's in the western part of Harare, excuse me. We've had no contact nor have his lawyers had any contact with Mr. Biti yet. So we're desperately trying to figure out if he's in good condition. We've asked that he be brought in front of a magistrate as soon as possible and charged with something. I mean, if it's legal for the Government of Zimbabwe to charge Mr. Biti with a crime, they need to do this as rapidly as possible and let the judicial process begin. The MDC has maintained the services of some very, very good lawyers, but so far these attorneys have been unable to even see their client.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: And our next question comes from Stephen Kaufman. State your affiliation, please.

QUESTION: Yes, I'm with America.gov. Mr. Ambassador, I wanted to ask about any movement on Security Council, and specifically, I know that South Africa has been – if you all have been reaching out to South Africa to try to push something through maybe in the next week or so?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Stephen, I think that that question would be better responded to by our colleagues in IO. But let me do just say that yes, we do continue to reach out through the Security Council. We've made a concerted effort to get everyone on board with this issue. To date, I can't say that we've been super successful, but we will continue to try.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: And the next question comes from Lach Carmichael. Please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: Hi, Ambassador. I'm from AFP news agency. It sounds like the estimates of the threat to people who don't have food have increased. When you last talked to us last week, the estimate I had – you had was about 1 million people could be affected. Now you say 4 million. Could you be more precise, what food they may not be getting by the end of the month? Could it be just down to one meal a day? What's – how bad is it?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Lach, the situation right now is bad and it's continuing to get worse. People are not getting the food that they need, number one. Number two, if this situation continues, and we're hearing reports from all of our humanitarian colleagues here, saying that if this continues much beyond the election, which is two weeks from today, that it will be disastrous for Zimbabwe. The figure of 1 million that I was giving you – that I gave you last week was for U.S. assistance only. The larger, expanded figure of 4 million, a potential of up to 4 million, includes all the humanitarian NGOs and donors in Zimbabwe. And now, that's an unconfirmed figure and it's a fairly preliminary figure, but we do know that last year there were a lot of people in this country that received humanitarian food assistance. And what's happened now with this edict coming out from Minister Goche's office, it seems that things will only get worse.

OPERATOR: Does that answer your question?

QUESTION: Well, how much food are they getting per day already? And how much –

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Right now, they're getting nothing. We have stopped all food assistance. From the U.S. side, this is what I can absolutely speak to, Lach. From the U.S. side, everything has been stopped.

QUESTION: Well, that means what the average Zimbabwean is eating is what, one meal a day right now, without that food assistance?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: That's correct. Maybe even less than that in some cases.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you.

OPERATOR: And the next question comes from Michele Keleman. Please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: I'm with National Public Radio. I'm wondering if U.S. diplomats or you, Mr. Ambassador, have gone out to the countryside since that last incident. What any of your staffers have been seeing in terms of a campaign, whether there's actually any campaign going on?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Michele, we just made a trip yesterday. I went out yesterday with the Dutch chargé and six other members from my staff. We went to an area called Mutoko. We visited a religious affiliated hospital and the fear was palpable there. We met with the doctor in charge of the hospital. There are two doctors and fourteen nurses. About two to three thousand patients each month come through this hospital. It's a – because of its religious affiliations, this hospital has access to drugs and medical supplies that many of the government hospitals and clinics in this country do not have. But the chief administrator, the head doctor, was absolutely afraid to talk to us, afraid to have us walk around and visit with patients. I specifically asked, "Do you have any patients in this hospital who have been victims of the political violence?" And he responded, "No." I asked him if we could just walk around and talk to the patients and he said he would prefer that we not do that.

Upon leaving our meeting with the doctor, we did talk to several other people, including some of the guards there, and a police sergeant who was there with his wife when she was there for treatment. And we got a much different story. We were told that there were 25 to 30 patients in the hospital at the current time who had suffered the violence, who had suffered from violence and need – required hospitalization. The police officer, the police personnel, told us about the heavy, heavy violence that he had witnessed in the area.

QUESTION: And can you describe, I mean, what are you talking about when you talk about violence?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: We're talking about people being taken from their homes, beaten, homes being burned; graineries, where people store their grains, those being burned. People are now – we're in the winter. We're the exact opposite of Washington. We're in the – we're moving into cold winter here. Morning time temperature drops down to near freezing. People are being forced, because they have no homes, they have no possessions, to sleep rough out in the bush. It's darn cold out there. This is absolutely inhumane.

But this area that we're in, Mutoko, before March 29th election, Morgan Tsvangirai and the MDC campaigned heavily in this area. They can no longer even set foot in this area right now. The government has said this is a no-go area for MDC and that's being upheld.

QUESTION: Thank you.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Sure.

OPERATOR: And the next question comes from Janine Zacharia. Please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: Hi, I'm with Bloomberg. Can you hear me?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Yes, I can, Janine.

QUESTION: Okay. Two things. It was unclear to me how having observers is going to prevent retribution against people who vote for the opposition, and what is the point of having observers when clearly already the election is deemed unfair? I mean, I just don't understand going ahead with the sort of mockery of observing an election that clearly is not going to be a fair election.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Well, I think that anything less would be just to hand power over to the Mugabe regime for another five years of their failed policies and programs. The observers, I do believe, will assist in the situation. What we're concerned about right now is number one, that there will be massive ballot box stuffing. Observers can help stop that. Number two, that people will be intimidated on the day of the election itself.

One of the tactics that we know will be used is people are being told in the countryside that when you arrive at the polling station, you have to declare yourself illiterate, whether you are or not. And under the constitution – under, I'm sorry, under the election law here, if you're illiterate, then you can have assistance in filling out your ballot. So we're going to have a lot of illiterate people if ZANU gets their way on Election Day. And that's why we need observers out there to ensure that these types of tactics do not happen.

QUESTION: And the idea of retribution against the people after the observers depart a day later?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: You know, one of the things that we're starting to hear more and more – there's an old adage, I'm told, here in Zimbabwe that says you can only kill me one time. And the people are starting to stand up and say despite the violence, despite the intimidation, we need a change in Zimbabwe. And I'm hearing more and more people saying, you know, this will not deter them from voting their hearts.

But we're expecting to see a fair turnout on Election Day. We're expecting to see people vote their conscience and what we hope is that the election observers will make a difference in the honest counting of those votes.

OPERATOR: Does that conclude your question, Janine?

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

OPERATOR: And just a reminder, to ask a question, press *1. Our next question comes from Paul Eckhart. Please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: Hello, Ambassador. Paul Eckhart from Reuters. Your colleagues in the capitol from China, the Chinese Embassy – China is of course a well-known backer of the regime and not long ago was found to be trying to ship weapons to the government during the earlier phase in this crisis. I wonder, do – are you – do you stay in touch with them? What sort of profile do they take in this situation? They are also an important economic supporter of Mugabe.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: The Chinese have a fairly large embassy here, but they keep an exceptionally low profile. I've met the Chinese Ambassador on a couple of social occasions. I paid a courtesy call on him when I first arrived here. But you rarely, rarely ever see the Chinese out – or the Embassy, the Chinese Embassy out and about town here.

We do have reports that China is aiding ZANU-PF in the conduct of this election. That's unconfirmed right now, but it would not be too surprising. China has an extremely, extremely close relationship with this government. There have been quite a few programs going. Mr. Mugabe has started a "Look East" policy for Zimbabwe. And much of the mining resources have been committed to China here in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe still has very active platinum mines. Their tobacco crop, a large portion of the tobacco crop, which is still very, very vibrant here in Zimbabwe, is going to China.

So there's quite a bit of business back and forth between China and Zimbabwe. And again, there's a large Chinese mission here, but very, very little contact with them and very, very little sight of them out and about in the capital of Harare.

QUESTION: When you say the conduct of the election, do you mean the aiding in this report? Not that you've verified it, but do you mean in the thuggery side of things or just in the material --

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: On the – let me be very – I'm happy that you asked that, Paul. No, not on the thuggery side of it. It's particularly on the material side of the election.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you.

OPERATOR: And our next question comes from Charles Smith. Please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: Hi, I'm from Media 24, South Africa, based in Washington, D.C. I'd like to know, Mr. Ambassador, do you have any contact with President Mbeki? And what do you think about his statement yesterday that he won't be a stone-thrower for any other government on President Mugabe?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: I'm sorry, Charles. I did not understand the second half of your question. Let me do answer the first part. No, I do not have any contact with President Mbeki. Our Ambassador in South Africa, Ambassador Bost, would be the person that would handle that, and for a president, it would probably even go up to our Assistant Secretary, Dr. Jendayi Frazer in Washington to have those types of contacts.

And could you please repeat the second half of your question?

QUESTION: I'm sorry. He mentioned yesterday, President Mbeki, that he won't be somebody who is sort of an attack dog for any other government on President Mugabe. I guess that has to do with the letter he wrote to President Bush last month, that he said, you know, the United States must stay out of Africa. So --

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Okay. I understand that and I'll – you know, I'm not certain where President Mbeki is going with that, but I don't think it's being an attack dog to state nothing more than the obvious. South Africa has had a group of generals who have been here. They went out into the field and actually did a very, very good job of witnessing the violence and the intimidation firsthand. They went back to South Africa. They did report to President Mbeki. And after that, we had heard nothing from them.

This group is back now in Zimbabwe. And we're hoping that they will, again, continue their efforts, their fine efforts, in trying to point out the problems in the run-up to this election. It is very, very obvious that there's political intimidation, there's thuggery, there's outright theft, murder happening here in Zimbabwe right now. And for someone to come step up and say that is not being an attack dog for anyone. It's just stating the obvious.

QUESTION: Thanks.

OPERATOR: And our next question comes from Elise Labott. Please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: I'm with CNN. Thank you. I just have one more quick question. Ambassador, you spoke about that the – when you visited this hospital, that some police were talking to you about some of the violence they've witnessed. And I was wondering if you see a kind of turning of the tide of some of Mugabe's, perhaps, police or military officials, that perhaps they're unhappy with the situation that the government is instigating? And perhaps, is that something that you can exploit? When you say that people are more and more starting to seek change, do you expect that that would include the rank and file of police and military forces?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Elise, yes, there's no question about it. In the rank and file of the police and the military there's a strong, strong feeling that this government, the policies of the Mugabe government, are hurting the country. We have reports that the police are being forced to vote for ZANU-PF. They use a system here – it's much like – it's called postal voting, which is very much like our absentee ballots. And the lower-ranking personnel are taking grand exception to this because they have to cast their postal ballot in front of their superior officers. And these superior officers, literally, to the person are absolutely wed to the president and his policies.

So these people are being forced to vote, many times against their conscience. These votes are going to be brought in and included in the general ballots of their particular – their ward, their home area where they're allowed to vote. And no one has any idea if this is going to be a valid vote or not. From everything that we're seeing, it will not be. This is one of the tactics that this government is using to stuff ballot boxes.

QUESTION: But do you think that, I mean, they could turn against him at some point? I mean, we've seen this happen in Serbia and Georgia. I mean, do you sense enough of a disgruntledness by the military or the police that perhaps they could turn against him in some kind of uprising?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: (Inaudible) I don't sense that at the current time. Zimbabwe was renowned as recently as eight, ten years ago with the professionalism of its military and its police forces. Even until recently, Zimbabwe was training South African pilots, military pilots. This is a very, very good military. It's going downhill rapidly, but I do not see the potential now for any illegal military actions at the current time.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. GALLEGOS: Okay. I think we're heading towards – I think the Ambassador has time for another one or two questions, then we could wrap up.

OPERATOR: Okay. Our next question comes from Kim Ghattas. Please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: Good morning, this is Kim Ghattas from the BBC. Ambassador, I was just wondering about the number of people that you were expecting to turn up to the vote. You said that you're expecting a fair turnout. But last time when you spoke to us, you also said that supporters of the MDC were having their ID cards confiscated, which meant not only that they would not get food aid, but also that they would not be able to vote in the elections. Do we have any sense of how many people had their ID cards confiscated?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: No, we don't, Kim. What we do know is that we've had somewhere between 25 and 30,000 people who have been displaced from their homes in the countryside. And I think I mentioned before that this is critical in this election because if you're not in your home ward, then you're not allowed to vote. Now many of

these people are being requested to go back by the MC – by the MDC are being requested to go back to the countryside and cast their votes anyway. And this, again, is why we need election observers and political election monitors from the MDC and from independent organizations here in Zimbabwe out and about in the field to ensure that these people do go back, at least (inaudible) from casting their votes. I think the higher the turnout here, the greater (inaudible) fair election in Zimbabwe.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: And the next question comes from Daniel Dombey. Please state your affiliation.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) *Financial Times*. Ambassador, you've spoken about what you call an atmosphere of thuggery and murder. I'm just wondering first, who – have you ever seen any election that compares with this on that front? And secondly, what would you say to those who are worried that if they vote their conscience, they'll be risking their lives and their limbs in precisely that period after the observers leave? What – how would you encourage people? What would you say to win around people who are afraid (inaudible) they've seen everything in this election?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Thanks, Daniel. In my long diplomatic career, I have never seen anything even comparable to this. And I was in Cote d'Ivoire back in the late 1990s for the coup d'etat, and in the next year, the election violence that followed upon that. But that was nothing compared to what I've seen here in Zimbabwe.

What I would say to the people of Zimbabwe is that you need to make a stance. I think there are a lot of good-willed people here in Zimbabwe; there are a lot of people that are eager to see change. We have a lot of great people who are actually putting their lives on the line, trying to help this country towards a democratic future. But I think more people here in Zimbabwe need to step up.

It's very unfortunate, Daniel, that so many people, some estimates of up to four million Zimbabweans, have voted with their feet. They left this country; they moved to South Africa, they moved to the U.K., they're living all around the world, most of them here in the southern tier of Africa. But these people have actually already cast their votes by saying, you know, we can no longer live with the misguided policies of the Mugabe regime. And hopefully, these folks will see fit to start coming back to Zimbabwe in some large numbers if we ever get a representative government in place here.

QUESTION: And just one follow-up, just – sorry, to clear up the figures. You said between 25,000 and 35,000 had been displaced in the rural areas? Were those the numbers that you said?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: I said 20* to 30,000, yes. The number – it's probably closer to 30,000 right now.

QUESTION: Thank you.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: We have some updated figures on a number of people who have been injured so badly that they require hospitalization. And that number is now up to 3,000.

QUESTION: (Inaudible)

MR. GALLEGOS: Okay. With that, I think, Mr. Ambassador, if you're about ready, I think we can wrap it up.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Yeah, thank you. I appreciate that, Gonzo. I've got another call I've got to make.

MR. GALLEGOS: Yes, sir. I appreciate your time and I hope to speak with you soon. Take care.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Thank you.

OPERATOR: And that concludes today's call. Please disconnect your lines at this time.

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