



Situation in Zimbabwe

**Henrietta Fore, Administrator, United States Agency for International Development
U.S. Ambassador to Zimbabwe James D. McGee; Director of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance Ky Luu**
On-the-Record Briefing
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MR. WOOD: Okay, everyone, as promised, we have with us today USAID Administrator Henrietta Fore who's going to talk to you about the humanitarian situation on the ground in Zimbabwe. She will take - she will make some opening remarks and then take some questions, and then we'll turn it over to Ambassador McGee, our Ambassador in Zimbabwe. He's going to talk to you about the political situation. So without further ado, Administrator Fore.

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: Thank you. Good morning. We offer our deepest condolences to those who have lost loved ones in the cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe. We are very concerned about the situation, and we are working to help contain the spread of the disease.

Today, I am pleased to announce that USAID has allocated an additional 6.2 million U.S. dollars to help combat the cholera outbreak. This is in addition to more than \$4.6 million in USAID we already have in country providing emergency water, sanitation, and hygiene programs.

To manage the United States response effort, USAID has deployed a Disaster Assistance Response Team, a DART team, to Zimbabwe. This team includes water and sanitation, public health, and emergency experts from USAID, as well as from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In coordination with the international community, the DART team has completed rapid assessments and has identified ways the United States can best assist. The United States will support international coordination efforts by funding the World Health Organization's command- and-control center, and a health coordinator position for the United Nations coordination structure. We will also work to intensify community health and hygiene promotion and education.

In addition, the DART has already identified shortfalls of necessary commodities. Over the coming days, USAID will provide emergency relief supplies, such as soap, rehydration tablets, and water bladders to address the most pressing needs. Our programs are focused on clean water, sanitation and hygiene, and public health. The DART will provide technical assistance to the international community and make recommendations for additional United States assistance to help combat cholera in Zimbabwe should it be needed.

We also have USAID experts traveling to the border areas in neighboring countries where Zimbabweans are going to seek cholera treatment and other necessary services. We will continue to monitor the situation in those areas, and are prepared to provide assistance should it be necessary.

I want to make one thing clear: This cholera outbreak did not happen overnight. Over the years, Zimbabwe's healthcare system has deteriorated and infrastructure has collapsed. Poor water and sanitation systems, coupled with increasingly inaccessible health and other services, have caused the cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe. This outbreak is a breakdown of the Zimbabwe's Government services, pure and simple.

In light of the deteriorating conditions, the United States, working alongside the international community, has been preparing for a cholera outbreak for quite some time. Before the disease was widespread, USAID began building contingencies into its ongoing emergency programs, allowing us to quickly direct our assistance to specific target for cholera outbreaks.

In total, today's contribution brings the total United States humanitarian assistance to Zimbabwe's food and health crisis to more than 226 million U.S. dollars since October 2007. This emergency assistance is in addition to the approximately 32.2 million U.S. dollars that we have in a development program in Zimbabwe for the fiscal year 2008.

Again, I want to express our deepest sympathies to the people of Zimbabwe. The United States remains committed to helping you in your time of need. Thank you.

Yes.

QUESTION: President Mugabe said on television, I think either last night or today, that the cholera outbreak had stopped. What are you seeing on the ground?

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: We are not seeing that it has stopped. We currently have a report that there are approximately 800 deaths, 16,000 people infected. This is a cholera outbreak that is ongoing and urgent.

QUESTION: Madame Ambassador, you spoke about a UN coordination structure that is - is it being envisioned or is it already on the ground? Can you explain a little bit about that?

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: The Ambassador can talk a bit more about this in just a moment. But the United Nations does have operations on the ground, but they need to be strengthened. And so our intent with this assistance is that we gather as an international community, that we support the United Nations that we support government infrastructure, because the health systems within Zimbabwe need to be reestablished and rebuilt. We are taking the place of government services here.

QUESTION: Going back to President Mugabe's remarks about the crisis being over. If you disagree, why would he - why would he say that and what does that tell you about the situation - the political situation?

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: Well, we're just deeply concerned. I will let the Ambassador talk more about the political situation. But this is clearly a humanitarian crisis. There are a great number of people who are in need, and people are losing their lives. And so we, as a community, must act.

QUESTION: Can you tell us a little bit more about the DART teams, when they were deployed, how many people are involved, and where they are exactly?

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: Yes. In fact, we can give you a complete brief on this one. I will ask Ky Luu to come up in just a minute --

QUESTION: Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: -- on the individuals we have on the team, when they were deployed, what they are doing, and then what their future is.

QUESTION: Good.

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: Yes.

QUESTION: Can you talk about whether or not they are having any problems having access, getting into --

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: Access remains a difficulty. For many of these areas, they are rural. For many of the people in rural areas, they are not going into the health clinics. So it means that health workers and aid workers need to go out to the people. Finding them, knowing where they are, getting communication out, is going to be a challenge for everyone.

Some of the message is for good sanitation. It is that you use soap, that you use tablets that will - rehydration salts and solutions. So getting information out to health workers, to community workers, to individuals in the communities, is going to be extremely important, and this will be a challenge.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) the Zimbabwean Government officials were putting restrictions on your movements.

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: Yes, this also. So it's going to be a challenge for all of us.

QUESTION: But has the government committed to you to allow, you know access to the DART teams and, you know, all of the kind of things that you - have they pledged cooperation with you to get what you need to get done?

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: Yes. We - we hear the words. I think what's important now is that we see the actions. We just have a great number of people that are in need.

QUESTION: But they allowed the teams into the country.

ADMINISTRATOR FORE: They have allowed the teams into the country. They are working as our partners in country. This is a - this is a national challenge.

All right. With that, I will turn it over to Ambassador McGee and then to Ky Luu, the head of our Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, to further follow up. Thank you all very much.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Good morning. I'd just like to expand and amplify a little bit on some of the things that the - that Deputy Secretary^[1] Fore had talked about. This truly is a humanitarian crisis, but I don't think that you can - you can delink the current humanitarian crisis from the political crisis that Zimbabwe finds itself in. And this political crisis is nothing more than the result of the failed economic policies, corruption, and human rights abuses on the part of the Government of Zimbabwe.

Now this is a fairly common theme and something that I've talked about quite a bit before. I will today echo the sentiments and the statements made by Prime Minister of Kenya Odinga, Archbishop Tutu, President Bush himself, Secretary Rice, the French President Sarkozy, and the UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown. They've all said in the last week that it's time for Mugabe to go, and I think that what we're seeing right now with this continued humanitarian - manmade humanitarian crisis, that they're absolutely correct. It is time for Mugabe to go. He has outlived his usefulness in Zimbabwe.

When I left the country last week, the cholera situation was bad. Since I've left, it's gotten worse. As the Deputy Secretary^[2] has said, there are now over 16,000 confirmed cases and over 780 confirmed deaths. The issue with that is we still don't know how bad the situation is because we just don't have accurate reporting capabilities from the countryside. So the extent of this situation with the cholera itself could be a heck of a lot worse than the reports that we're getting.

What we do know is that the government hospitals remain closed. All the government hospitals in Harare are closed. The ability of the government to collect garbage is zero. People are either using boreholes wells for drinking water or they're picking it up out of the sewers themselves. The rainy season is somewhat late in starting in Harare. We had some initial very heavy rains, and then we had nothing for the last ten days before I departed country. The situation is truly grim.

One man and his cronies, Robert Mugabe, are holding this country hostage. And Zimbabwe is rapidly deteriorating into failed state status. Someone mentioned this morning at a funeral, at Elliot Manyika's funeral this morning, that Mugabe said that there is no longer a crisis. I think this just shows how out of touch he is with the reality on the ground in Zimbabwe. So President Mugabe needs to step aside. He needs to respect the will of the people of Zimbabwe as expressed in the March election, and let a representative government form, take place in Zimbabwe that will take care of the needs of the people.

And with that, I'll be happy to try to answer any questions you may have.

QUESTION: You're asking President Mugabe to step aside and form a more representative government, but so far, he has just ignored the international community, as he has for the last few years. So what can the international community - or what should it be doing? Because it - from the outside, it looks as though the international community is failing the people of Zimbabwe. They're living in unimaginable misery and it just seems to be getting worse.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: I think what we're doing is exactly the right steps to make - you know, we continue to put the pressure on the Government of Zimbabwe. We continue to work with our colleagues in SADC, the African Union, and the United Nations to bring pressure on this illegal and illegitimate regime of Robert Mugabe. And I think that this is finally starting to take hold. The government, despite what they say in public, is reeling from these actions.

QUESTION: But what are these actions? You say you're putting pressure. What sort of pressure are you --

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: We're hearing calls from - especially from African leaders that Mugabe has to go. Today, South Africa declared an emergency on its border. It has not actually closed the border, but this is the next step from that, which is declaring an emergency on the border of South Africa.

The cholera crisis has gotten so far out of hand the South African Health Minister actually went to the border on the South African side of town called Messina, on the Zimbabwe side of town called Beitbridge, which is the actual border. She toured the South African side, looked at the facilities there, and it's no secret that the South African Government is expending a massive amount of its resources trying to care for the people of Zimbabwe. I think that the Minister had no choice but to declare this health emergency in this area.

And these actions are finally starting to resonate throughout Africa. People are starting to see that we do have a failed government with failed policies in Zimbabwe, and the hue and cry is raising throughout Africa that Mugabe has to go.

QUESTION: So what are you - what do you expect these states to do? What do you expect South Africa to do?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: What we expect the SADC, the regional body, to do is to uphold its own laws. I mean, Zimbabwe is signatory to all the - all the laws of SADC that says that, you know, government should take care of its people, government should respect human rights. You know, that's an issue that we can talk about in a little bit, but, you know, the human rights situation in Zimbabwe is off the chart right now. Here we are talking about a global political agreement. We have a titular prime minister in Morgan Tsvangirai, who can't even get a passport from his own country. We have people, activists in this country, who continue to disappear. Two weeks ago, we had 14 people disappear.

The day before I left, coming to the United States, I presided over an HIV and AIDS ceremony for the first lady in the country to declare her status, a very, very brave lady who unfortunately died two years later. But we celebrate her bravery every year. The person who was supposed to moderate that awards ceremony was picked up by a dozen people at her home, 5 o'clock in the morning, in her bedclothes. She has disappeared. We have not heard from her since.

Now, these are the types of things that go on with regularity in Zimbabwe, and these are the types of things that have to stop.

QUESTION: Yeah, but what can they do materially - SADC - except to say, okay, this is bad? What can they do?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Well, SADC can - SADC has a lot of options at its control. What they're - you know, we're not going to try to dictate to SADC what they should do. You know, what we're saying to SADC is, you know, you can see that the situation in Zimbabwe is bad; the same that we can see the situation in Zimbabwe is bad. SADC has stepped up to the plate before with other countries and made a difference, and we're hoping that they're going to do the same thing with Zimbabwe.

QUESTION: Is there any consideration of invoking the UN responsibility to protect? I mean, certainly, it's a humanitarian crisis that has, you know, regional implications.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: We - I don't think that we're at that point that you're alluding to yet. We're getting closer, I think, to it. The dialogue continues with the United Nations, as I mentioned, with the African Union, and with SADC. And we're hoping that these bodies will finally just say enough is enough in Zimbabwe.

QUESTION: Well, what - I mean, but what are the practical implications of that? I mean, everyone could say enough is enough. Everyone - the whole United Nations could call for him to go and he could not --

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: And that's exactly what we would hope would happen.

QUESTION: And - but, I mean, he's certainly - I mean, short of some kind of military action or revolution, which certainly the Zimbabwean people don't seem that fast --

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Well, let me say this. You know, we're looking for a peaceful solution in Zimbabwe. The one thing that we do not want is more of what has happened year after year after year in Zimbabwe. You know, there are a lot of people in Zimbabwe in this government with very, very bloody hands. And, you know, the government is not above doing whatever is necessary to retain power. We have seen this all the way since the early 1980s in Zimbabwe. We don't want to see a repeat of this again.

So we're looking for peaceful solutions, and we feel that the best way to achieve these peaceful solutions is through the regional and international bodies. They do need to step up. They need to step their efforts up to continue to put the pressure on Zimbabwe to reach a peaceful solution. Short of that, then we'll have to see what does happen.

QUESTION: You said they have several options. What are these options?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: For the - for the regional bodies?

QUESTION: Yes.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: I'm not going to try to speak for them on those options, but, you know, I think that everything is on the table. Literally, everything is on the table.

QUESTION: Sir?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Yes, sir.

QUESTION: Back on the cholera crisis, you said it's getting worse and President Mugabe said it's over. Does that concern you that he may be intending to either further restrict or, in fact, inhibit the humanitarian assistance efforts that are underway?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: As Secretary^[3] Fore said earlier, no, we have not had any indication that the humanitarian effort is going to be restricted whatsoever. So far, despite issues, and there are always issues in Zimbabwe even at the best of times, our colleagues in the NGO community are doing an excellent job of getting the assistance out to the people that it's intended to reach.

That said, because of the failed government systems themselves, we just don't have an effective partner to work with. We're trying our best to work with the Government of Zimbabwe, but their hands are tied. They're very limited on what they themselves can do.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: When was the last time you actually met face-to-face or talked to Robert Mugabe? And I wonder if you could reflect a little bit on your tenure there?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: It's probably been six months when I first arrived. I've been in country now for a year. It seems a lot longer. I presented my credentials November of 2007. As a matter of fact, it was on Thanksgiving Day. I won't forget that for a long, long time.

I've seen things deteriorate tremendously in a one-year period. When I arrived in Zimbabwe, the stores - I can't say they were full, but there were stores. You could buy things in the supermarkets. Inflation was at a figure I still can't quite get my head around, but it was in the hundreds of thousands of percent. Now, it's officially in 261 million percent or some ridiculous figure like that. And our private economists that we talk to tell us that it's in the trillions of percent.

And I don't know what that means. What I do know is this. You know, I talk to people who - my gardener comes to work in the morning, and he lives out in an area called Chitungwiza, which is about 20 kilometers outside the city. And he tells me that it costs him the equivalent of 50 cents to take public transportation into the city. But on some days, that price has gone up in the time that he works at my house from 50 cents to a dollar. That's how rapidly inflation is taking over in this country.

And even though the economy is totally dollarized now - I mean, it's a rare place where you can go and pay in Zimbabwe dollars. I cannot find them. I try to play by the letter of the law and use Zimbabwe dollars. I can't find Zimbabwe dollars. I've opened a local bank account, but bankers tell me no Zim dollars to be had. So everything -- all transactions are made in U.S. dollars. I'm getting a collection of small U.S. dollar notes, one-dollar bills now to carry back to me - with me to Zimbabwe because nobody can make change. And that's the other issue there.

So yeah, there has been a continued downward spiral in Zimbabwe. I think one of the things that impresses me most in the wrong direction that this country is going is in the education system. Fifteen years ago, Zimbabwe had a higher literacy rate than United States of America, absolute higher literacy rate. People really place tremendous importance on getting an education, ensuring that their kids have a better chance at an education than they did.

Twenty five percent of the national budget in 1992 went towards education; today, 18 cents per child. It's a ridiculous figure, 18 cents per child. And this is coming from a man who himself was an educator. Robert Mugabe started his career as a teacher. This is also coming from a man who has a daughter who is studying in Hong Kong and costing the people of Zimbabwe millions of U.S. dollars for her stay in Hong Kong. But they can only find 18 cents per child for the kids in Zimbabwe to get a higher education. Again, I think he's just totally out of touch with reality with what's happening in his own country.

QUESTION: And he once threatened to kick you out, but has that ever come back?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: I'm still there so far. My bottom line is this: I'm just not going to stand idly by and not say what needs to be said. If things are bad in the country, things are bad. If things are good - are improving, we're more than happy to work with the Government of Zimbabwe, we're more than happy to pass out the kudos where they're necessary. But they're so few and far between.

Yes, sir.

QUESTION: I wanted to ask about the abductee issue. Is this something -

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: I'm sorry?

QUESTION: The abductee issue. Is this something that we've raised with Zimbabwean officials, and can you comment on any efforts that are being made to find these people?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: We've raised this. The international - I should say the diplomatic community has actually raised these. Let me be exactly precise for you. Seventeen MDC activists, including a baby, were taken over a month ago, and those folks are still unaccounted for despite - despite court orders to - for the police or any other government agencies that hold them to locate them and bring them forth. I mentioned Jestina Mukoko, who was abducted on December the 3rd and whose whereabouts are still unknown. Two other staffers from the Zimbabwe Peoples Party, a fellow named Broderick Takawira and Pascal Gonzo, were abducted from their offices on December the 8th by five men. Their whereabouts, still unknown. A lawyer - the brother of a lawyer, Harrison Nkomo, was abducted by four men from his home near Masvingo on December the 5th, whereabouts unknown. And then we have an MDC advisor, Gandhi Mudzingwa, who was abducted from his home on December the 9th. And again, no one knows - no one claims to know - the whereabouts of Mr. Mudzingwa.

The Zimbabweans have lost confidence in their law enforcement system, and the government cannot ensure the safety and security of the people of Zimbabwe. As a matter of fact, the government may even be complicit in many of these issues. Right now, we just don't know where these people are, and we continue to call upon the Government of Zimbabwe to bring these people forward. If they've committed a crime, put them into the justice system. It's ready to work.

I'm sorry, ma'am.

QUESTION: I was wondering if you were disappointed that it's taken so long and it's taken a cholera outbreak that is affecting Zimbabwe's neighbors now for Zimbabwe's neighbors to actually start saying enough is enough?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: I'm not going to use the word "disappointed." That's not my word. You know, whatever it takes is what it takes. And you know, we are pleased to see Zimbabwe's neighbors taking a much more proactive stance on the excesses of this government. We've heard calls from Kenya, from Botswana, from Tanzania, from Zambia. Malawi recently stood up and said, you know, enough is enough; Zimbabwe has to clean up its act or President Mugabe has to go. This is what we're really desperate to hear, and these are the types of things that we're very pleased to hear.

QUESTION: But not from South Africa, though.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: We have not heard that from South Africa. You know, again, we work behind the scenes with South Africa. South Africa, as everyone knows, is the - let's call it what it is. It's the big dog on the block. And we expect South Africa to take an active stance on everything that happens in the southern tier of Africa. We do continue to work quietly and behind the scenes with South Africa to make that happen.

QUESTION: Thank you.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Thank you.

MR. LUU: Just to follow up on the question regarding the DART, we have a five-person DART team on the ground. They've been on the ground now for almost a week. The DART team does include a health advisor and a water sanitation expert. They have been able to travel around. They have carried out field assessments. They've gone to areas of high reported cases to verify, to coordinate with other donors and the nongovernmental organizations.

I would note that as the Deputy Secretary^[4] announced this morning, that the DART team has confirmed that from what they have been able to see that the situation is worsening. There are reported case fatality rates of 4.8 percent. This is far and above the emergency threshold, which is 1 percent. In certain areas, they are noting 50 percent case fatality rates. This is really unacceptable because, for cholera, this is easily treatable. Those who are coming down and (inaudible), it's rehydration.

The problem that we're facing here is that those cholera victims are either not getting treated, they're not going to the clinics in time, or they're not going at all. And this is, again, compounded by the fact that there are lack of salaries to pay for healthcare workers within the system, so there's a lack of faith that if they show up that they're going to be treated.

So, you know, we're watching the situation very closely. We're hoping that the announcement of the \$6.2 million this morning will go to address kind of the immediate needs here, looking at coordination to strengthen the existing structure on the ground right now, also looking at - to health education, increasing access to water, and also bringing in much-needed emergency supplies like water purification tablets, jerry cans, these sorts of essential supplies.

And one thing to look out on the horizon here is that the rains have started, and we can expect that with the rains that there will be a further spread of the cholera because of the lack of the infrastructure here where many of the citizens are - have resorted to digging boreholes for water. When the rains come, they will flood and contaminate the boreholes. So this is something that we're very concerned with.

And another thing to keep in mind here is with the Christmas migration, where the Zimbabweans will be moving back from their urban areas out to the rural areas for the holidays that may contaminate areas that have not been contaminated to date.

So that's all to say here is that the DART is working with the international community, with the United Nations, our NGO partners to continue to provide surveillance and to continue to provide much-needed essential, life-saving services.

QUESTION: USAID announced 600,000 on Friday. Is the 6.2 million in addition to that?

MR. LUU: Yes, this is all new money, \$6.2 million today.

QUESTION: Okay. Is the 600,000 included in that or -

MR. LUU: No, no. This is above and beyond the \$600,000.

QUESTION: Okay, thanks.

QUESTION: And how long the team will stay in Zimbabwe? For how long?

MR. LUU: The team right now, in terms of the DART, it will stay on the ground, given what we're able to see in terms of tracking the progress of the outbreak. They've noted, for example, in areas where there have been high incident, it has tapered off. But the tapering off in these areas is because the disease has run its course, and they're very concerned that it's moving into new areas. So what we're hoping to do here with the money that we've announced that will support WHO's control-and-command, also working with UNICEF in terms of water sanitation coordination sector, that if we can beef up that coordination sector, we may downsize the DART. But the point here is that if the situation gets worse, we are prepared to send in additional technical staff, as needed.

MR. WOOD: Thank you all very much.

[\[1\]](#) Correction- **Administrator**

[\[2\]](#) Correction- **Administrator**

[\[3\]](#) Correction- **Administrator**

[\[4\]](#) Correction- **Administrator**

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