



**Zimbabwe's Gukurahundi: Lessons from the 1980-1988 Disturbances in Matabeleland
and The Midlands**

Meeting Summary - 4 September 2007

Chatham House

Chair

Alex Vines - Head of Africa Programme Chatham House

Speakers

Mike Auret – former Catholic Commission for Peace (CCP)

Eileen Sawyer – former Chair, Legal Resource Foundation (LRF)

Nokhuthula Moyo – Chair, Legal Resource Foundation (LRF)

Noel Kututwa – Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum

Chatham House

4 September 2007

This summary is issued on the understanding that if any of the text is used, the speaker and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the event.

Speaker 1 - Mike Auret: former Catholic Commission for Peace (CCP)

The raising of the new flag on the 17th April 1980 to proclaim the independence of Zimbabwe was greeted with real joy. There was a seriousness and determination about reshaping people's lives, along with a generosity from the international community who were making money available for development. From 1981-82 there was a joyful reign in Zimbabwe. The crops grew and the government made plans to develop the nation. For five eighths of Zimbabweans the 1980s was the decade of development with schools, hospitals and road networks being built and television and radio stations being formed.

Despite ZAPU having 20 seats in parliament in 1982, there were clear tensions between them and ZANU (PF). These were intensified as the two sides had fought each other during the civil

war. A new force emerged from these troubles called the 5 Brigade. They were nicknamed 'Gukurahundi,' a Shona expression meaning 'the first rain that washes away the chaff of the last harvest before the spring rains.' The term used to have pleasant connotations, but in the 1980s it assumed an entirely more disturbing meaning, as the notorious North-Korean trained 5 Brigade murdered thousands of people in the Zimbabwean province of Matabeleland and parts of the Midlands. The truth is that the international community underestimated how committed a Marxist Mugabe actually was. He believed firmly in a one party system, which is why he invited ZAPU to join them. When they didn't, he tried to remove them and their followers. This is why Gukurahundi has come to be associated with 'washing away' the opposition.

At the end of January 1983 the 5 Brigade was sent into Matabeleland to curb support for a growing number of dissidents. Many of these dissidents were only children. When they came back from the war they had limited opportunities for work and only military training. So they picked up their weapons again and used them to rob stores, banks, and mines. The 5 Brigade committed their first atrocity in Matabeleland North, killing an entire village of 40 people. What followed, between the end of January and February were systematic detentions, beatings and killings. The army also pretended that they were checking homes for weapons as a way of directly harassing homes in Bulawayo. By the end of 1984 the 5 Brigades tactics had begun to change. There were fewer killings, but more people were going missing or being tortured. One example is the Valagwe camp, where 2-3000 people could be detained for torture and interrogation at any one time.

Prime Minister Mugabe promised to look into the human rights violations which were occurring in Matabeleland. This resulted in the Chihambakwe Commission in 1984, which gathered a huge body of evidence and testimony to the atrocities that were going on. This report was presented to Mugabe, but the findings were never published. However, pressure for a public report into the atrocities continued to grow. Such a report was forthcoming largely due to the efforts and funding of David Coulthard, a Bulawayo attorney who worked for the Legal Resources Foundation (LRF).

Speaker 2 - Eileen Sawyer: former Chair, Legal Resource Foundation (LRF)

Through our work, the LRF has consistently argued for the publishing of archives which detail what happened in Matabeleland and the Midlands from 1980-1988. This has still not happened.

Accusations have been levelled at the LRF, but we have never tried to divide the population, nor create ethnic divisions between Zimbabweans. All that we and the majority of the victims of Gukurahundi want is for the truth to be acknowledged.

David Coulthard's interest in publishing the facts stemmed from his interactions with a rural community called Lupani. This was a place where many of the heads of families had gone missing. There had been no death certificates issued for many of these men. As such, families were unable to register new births, put their children in school, or even enter into any binding agreements.

The 1987 Matabeleland report, on which the Catholic Commission for Peace (CCP) and the LRF came together, called for a 'greater openness to help with reconciliation.' The report made several recommendations, which include:

1. National acknowledgement: that the atrocities be recognised by the government and the report be published and made accessible to the general public in Zimbabwe;
2. Human rights violators: the amnesty in 1988 ensured that all those responsible for human rights violations were immune from prosecution. However it is important that those who were directly involved in these violations be removed from positions of power which may enable them to violate human rights again in the future;
3. Legal amendments: that the government should devise appropriate mechanisms by which to process claims and compensate victims of human rights violations;
4. Identification and burial of the remains of missing persons and remains buried in unmarked graves;
5. Health: entire communities in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces have suffered and are suffering psychological trauma. Reconciliation can only be provided through the medical healing of physical and emotional scars.
6. Communal reparation: because of the sheer scale of human rights violations, the government could not afford to pay out hundreds of millions of dollars for individual reparations. The most important gesture the state could make to entire communities would be in acknowledging complicity in their suffering through a communal trust;
7. Constitutional safeguards: Zimbabweans need to ensure through constitutional safeguards that what happened in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces in the 1980s never happens again.

There was a disagreement between the CCP and LRF about when the report should be published because of suggestions that it would fuel ethnic violence. However, with the 10th anniversary of the report today, there is no question that the people of Matabeleland wanted the rest of Zimbabwe and the outside world to know what had happened to them.

Mugabe has described this violence as 'a moment of madness.' In fact, it was an act of genocide, bordering on crimes against humanity. The events of Matabeleland remain a mouldering sore on the country and the effects will not go away until they have been properly dealt with. Most unfortunately, they stand out as the first act of violence by the government; which has continued to show that it is given to violence against its people.

Speaker 3 - Nokhuthula Moyo: Chair, Legal Resource Foundation (LRF)

I must start by saying that it is not a pleasure to attend such a gathering, although it is an opportunity we are grateful for.

We believe the situation in Zimbabwe may have been very different today, had our perspective, laid out in the 1987 recommendations, been followed.

The slaughter which occurred in Matabeleland and the Midlands provinces was not and has never been acknowledged. Thousands were killed during these events, and because they have not been dealt with, they continue to fester. They are also visible in the many human rights violations that have occurred since Gukurahundi, particularly in the land reform process and the repeated violence that occurs during elections.

The government set out on its land reform process in 2000. With 4000 white farmers owning 80 percent of the most fertile agricultural lands, almost everyone in Zimbabwe, be they black or white, was in agreement that some form of redistribution needed to take place. However, the government were, shall we say, 'over-enthusiastic' in their approach. They should have used the expertise of white farmers to groom a new generation of farmers that would in time increase the productivity of Zimbabwean farmlands. Instead, they set out on a programme of state sponsored violence to remove farmers from their lands. Much of this reclaimed land now

remains underproductive or unused. This might not have occurred had there been constitutional measures in place after Gukurahundi.

The violence shown by the government during election times is today considered normality. There are varying degrees of violence, and Gukurahundi was the university where these degrees were obtained. In the 1980s ZANU (PF) was engaged in trying to eradicate ZAPU. Since the 1990s it has been trying to eliminate the MDC. The arrests and brutal beating of Morgan Tsvangirai and his supporters on the 11th March 2007 sent out a clear signal. In Mugabe's Zimbabwe you can be arrested for just about anything, including doing your job.

Even more recently we have had the 18th of June price-fix. This is another example of the government's 'over-enthusiasm.' What may initially have been a positive measure to prevent spiralling inflation became a farce, as police and militia groups have gone into shops and slashed the price of commodities. These groups have then bought all the stock and sold it informally at astronomic prices. The result in Zimbabwe is empty shops and ordinary people having to buy expensive imported goods from Botswana and South Africa.

The government placed a blanket of silence over Gukurahundi by concealing it not only from the international community, but also the rest of Zimbabwe. It continues with the same policy today by shutting down media institutions and restricting free press. The government is also in the process of trying to push through the Access to Private Information Act. If introduced, this act will give them power to intercept all communications, including email. The result will be that the state is able to shut down freedom of information in Zimbabwe all together, which means that they will essentially be able get away with doing whatever they like.

Impunity is an art that the government and state officials have mastered. Cases do exist of judges making rulings against public officials. However, these officials are rarely held to account. Police and the army have known forms of torture which they use when interrogating suspects. One example is a method known as 'the submarine', where the detainee's head is immersed in water until they almost drown. Another is called 'Falango', where the soles of someone's feet are repeatedly beaten until they are unable to walk. The names of those in the Police who give such orders are well known, but they have never even been reprimanded, let alone stripped of their positions. The situation that prevails in Zimbabwe today is one that

tolerates impunity. The view is that because the President has done so much for the country that we agree with, we allow these atrocities to continue.

Some people argue that by reporting Gukurahundi we are sowing divisions into the country. I would point to the contrary. By debating what happened in the Matabeleland and Midland Provinces from 1980-1988, we are able to forge unity with our fellow Zimbabweans. There is an understanding that what happens to me today may happen to you tomorrow. It is too late to do much about Gukurahundi. All that we ask for is some human compassion and that we acknowledge and apologise for what has happened in the past. If we continue to throw a blanket over the past, we will be meeting again in the next 10 years about the violence that has gone on in the last 10 years. Zimbabweans want to heal and move forward.

Question & Answer

Q. What should be the UK's policy response to the ongoing situation in Zimbabwe?

A. Mike Auret: Not very much I'm afraid. The UK government and 'Little Blair' have borne the brunt of much of Mugabe's criticism. I would have to say that as the former colonial power this is rightly so. The best it can do now would be to acknowledge and support the findings of the Gukurahundi report.

A. Nokhuthula Moyo: I agree with Mike but would also suggest that the government could support the institutions that on a societal level build up pressure on the Zimbabwean state. This would show an increased responsibility on their part.

Q. I wondered what the panel thought about Mugabe being tried at The Hague?

A. Nokhuthula Moyo: There are many legal constraints that would stand in the way of such action. I think that you are hardly likely to outwit President Mugabe and we would rather explore other options.

A. Mike Auret: There is a fascinating yet depressing point to mention here. One reason why Mr Mugabe cannot hand over power is that it would leave him and many in ZANU-PF vulnerable to

prosecution. In my eyes, many of the government are guilty of attempted murder and would at least face charges of corruption. Therefore, they are unlikely to cede power willingly.

Q. My question is one on impunity. Incoming regimes often strike deals with those previously in power who have committed crimes. What does one do in this scenario?

A. Nokhuthula Moyo: We can't afford to compromise. There must be censure against the perpetrators of human rights abuses to prevent us from continuing the excesses of the past.

A. Mike Auret: Impunity is a disease of nations who violate human rights, which most of the worlds nations do. It is a fact that violators of human rights will be able to cut deals and go free. Imagine Thabo Mbeki trying to get ZANU (PF) to own up and take accountability for its actions! It will take a major shock for the political situation to change, but that will eventually happen. The Zimbabwean people will make it happen.

Q. Would anyone on the panel recommend 'Naming & Shaming' as a tool for change in Zimbabwe?

A. Eileen Sawyer: Yes, I would certainly agree that it can be of some benefit. For example, the Human Rights NGO Forum published a report in December 2006 called 'Who guards the guards,' which lists in detail many of those who have perpetrated violence.

Q. What is the scope for using the business community in Zimbabwe to help alongside civil society?

A. Nokhuthula Moyo: We are not making much headway with the business community. Despite their losses and the slashing of prices, they continue to tow the government line. They do not want to take action in case the government takes away their livelihood for good. In such a scenario, how do you act?

Q. Can the panel suggest any ways to help the traumatised and impoverished people who are the victims of Gukurahundi?

A. Nokhuthula Moyo: There needs to be a political solution before we can adequately assist the people with what they need. Donors are nice: they build schools and dig wells etc, but what we need in Zimbabwe is a total resolution of Gukurahundi before we can move forward.

A. Mike Auret: I agree with Nokhuthula's assessment that there is a need for addressing the whole issue. It has been worked out that total costs for damages occurred during Gukurahundi would be somewhere in the region of \$68 million. A new government is what is needed to readdress what was, and what wasn't done in Matabeleland.

Q. The international response to Zimbabwe is a difficult one. The UK is seen as a colonial arranger, African responses to Mugabe are partial, and any action/dialogue should be taken in multilateral form. How do we overcome this kind of diluted momentum?

A. Eileen Sawyer: There are African institutions in place which lobby and provide advocacy. As a coalition of 16 civil society groups, the Human Rights NGO Forum in Zimbabwe is an example of this. These institutions are being built up, but need further support from the international community. At the same time, there is increasing support being shown for the criticism of Mugabe's government. Recently we had the first ever criticism from the African Commission, and the voices of the AU are also very important.

Q. The EU summit in Lisbon is approaching. If Mugabe participates there is a feeling that Gordon Brown won't attend. Is that a good idea?

A. Mike Auret: There should be a show of outrage in Europe if Mugabe is invited. This is especially so as the AU and SADC won't do anything. The eyes of African history will look upon Mugabe as a hero. He is the man who avenged colonialism in Zimbabwe. This is reason enough as to why Mugabe still gets sympathy in Africa and why Thabo Mbeki retreats whenever Mugabe's name is mentioned.

Final Remarks - Noel Kututwa – Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum

This meeting is called 'Zimbabwe's Gukurahundi – Lessons Learnt.' Yet many of the lessons from Gukurahundi have still not been addressed. Paragraph 79 of the NEPAD strategic framework document states that:

'It is generally acknowledged that development is impossible in the absence of true democracy, respect for human rights, peace and good governance.'

There is a lack of all these things in Zimbabwe. This isn't a joyous 10 year commemoration, more a chance for us to get together and discuss ongoing issues. These include: the need for a more open society; acknowledging the gross atrocities that have taken place; and the necessity for the recommendations put forth in the Gukurahundi report to be taken forward.

Zimbabwe as a state continues to support human rights violations and act with impunity. From 2001-2007 an estimated 25,000 violations have occurred under Mugabe's watch. The lessons from Gukurahundi have not been learnt by the state.

However, we are grateful that 10 years on, the standards of the first report into Gukurahundi have been upheld. We also give thanks to Chatham House and to you for attending. A meeting like this shows us that this fight is not ours alone. There are concerned people in the world that will support and help us.