

# THE NEW YORKER

LETTER FROM ZIMBABWE

## THE DESTROYER

*Robert Mugabe and the destruction of Zimbabwe.*

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Mugabe at the Armed Forces Day celebrations in Harare, in August.

Nine hundred years ago, at a site on a high plateau north of the Limpopo River called Great Zimbabwe, Shona kings built stone palaces where they lived in splendid isolation from their subjects, with absolute authority over their means to sustain life—cattle herds, land, and the gold that came out of the earth. In the nineteen-sixties, members of a liberation movement in what was then Rhodesia, among them Robert Mugabe, adopted Great Zimbabwe's name to refer to the notional state they were fighting for. Today, Mugabe can be said to be the owner of the riches that remain in the nation of Zimbabwe. After twenty-eight years, he remains in power—Zimbabwe's only President since the end of whiteminority rule, in 1980. His nephew Leo, therefore, leads a cushioned life. He is an entrepreneur and has stakes in several companies, among them a mobile-phone network. He is a director of Zimbabwe Defense Industries, which purchases the weaponry for his uncle's Army—most of it, these days, from China. He also controls at least one large

farm that had been seized from its white owners. In the nineties, Leo earned notoriety for his alleged role in securing kickbacks, on behalf of his uncle and other officials, in the construction of Harare International Airport. In 2005, he was arrested for the contraband export and sale of government-owned food, but the charges were withdrawn for lack of evidence. (Leo said the allegations in both cases were unfounded.) That year, he was a candidate for Parliament for the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front, known as ZANU-P.F., the ruling party. He won in a landslide.

Earlier this year, Leo was added to a sanctions list first imposed by the United States in 2003 against Robert Mugabe and members of his government. The sanctions included a travel ban and the freezing of foreign assets, and also prohibit Americans from doing business with those on the list. Leo was also named on a sanctions list maintained by the European Union, for his arms-dealing activities. The new sanctions came in response to a wave of terror that Robert Mugabe had unleashed in the country's Presidential campaign. More than a hundred and fifty opposition supporters were murdered, many were raped, and thousands of people were beaten or tortured, often after being herded into so-called reeducation camps. Because of the violence, Mugabe's rival, Morgan Tsvangirai, whose Movement for Democratic Change, or M.D.C., had won a slender majority in the country's first round of voting in March, dropped out of the race and went into hiding. In the runoff vote on June 27th, Mugabe was unopposed and was quickly declared the winner.

Leo Mugabe works from an office building he owns in Harare, where I met him this summer. His brand-new silver Toyota Land Cruiser Amazon was parked outside. He is a slim, goateed man of fifty-one, and was dressed in a dark tailored suit. On the wall behind his desk hung a map of Zimbabwe made out of a patchwork of animal skins. His secretary, a young woman wearing a tight skirt and jacket, very high heels, and a great deal of jewelry, sat down with us. Her hair was arranged in red-dyed cornrows, and as Leo spoke she scribbled everything down on a notepad, expressing approval whenever he made a point, like a personal cheerleader. He was in a good mood, emanating confidence and optimism over Zimbabwe's future.

"Have you seen anyone beaten up since you've been here?" he asked. "There was less violence here than in Nigeria! And we all know why Zimbabwe's violence is being exaggerated—it's about the fortune in the land. We have certain resources here, such as nickel, gold, and platinum. I think Zimbabweans now understand that they are suffering because of sanctions by the United States, Great Britain, and the Europeans." Otherwise, Zimbabwe's prospects were excellent—his uncle had been distributing computers to rural schools, for example. "In a few years, rural Zimbabwe will be computer-literate. We are a nation which is moving, and these children will understand what empowerment really means."

That week, however, the inflation rate in Zimbabwe had officially reached eleven million per cent, the highest in the world; analysts later reckoned it to have been two hundred and thirty million per cent. Eighty per cent of Zimbabweans were out of work. Chronic malnutrition was prevalent, and starvation was spreading in the countryside. Close to two million Zimbabweans depended for survival on food handouts from international aid agencies. Twenty per cent of the population was infected with H.I.V./AIDS. Zimbabwe's life expectancy is forty-four years for men, forty-three for women. But Leo Mugabe scoffed at the idea that the situation was dire. "People are going about their business," he said. "No one is starving—they are driving nice cars! As a Christian, though, I think it is a challenge by God, and the attention being drawn to Zimbabwe is maybe to highlight that we are the new people of Israel, and that we have our own Moses." I understood "Moses" to be his uncle. His secretary greeted the analogy with an exclamation of delight.

Under Robert Mugabe's leadership, in 2000 his most militant supporters—many of them veterans of the seventies civil war—began forcibly occupying the country's five thousand white-owned commercial farms, with the help of armed gangs and, frequently, ZANU-P.F. officials. By almost all accounts, these actions precipitated the country's economic decline. Leo disagreed. "We have no regrets—he has none, and I have none," he said.

"We have taken the land," Leo went on. "So what is the next move? The next move is the mines, the minerals. We know we are very rich—without the British or the Americans. Yes, they invested, but if we have to we will go and take over the mines, too." Zimbabwe has the world's second-largest platinum reserves and is relatively rich in other minerals. The country's mining industry accounts for some forty per cent of its export income. In 2006, Robert Mugabe threatened to nationalize the mines by assigning Zimbabwe a controlling fifty-one-per-cent stake in them. Negotiations with the mine owners, which include South Africa's Implats and Anglo Platinum, and the United Kingdom's Rio Tinto, have dragged on ever since. "Rio Tinto can stay there in London, but their mines and their equipment will stay here. Is that what they want? Because that's where they are headed," Leo said. "We can give the mines to the black Zimbabweans, the people who work them now," he added. "We are not going to go back on the land issue, and the wealth that lies underneath the land will remain ours, too."

Leo wasn't bothered by the possibility that seizing the mines might leave Zimbabwe even more isolated. "We have

also invited other rich and powerful countries to come, and we know what they are interested in—the Russians and the Chinese and the Indians, too,” he said. “The Americans and the Brits are not coming to the table, but *these* guys are willing to deal with us. And they are already here.” He added, “It’s happening this year. By 2010, we will be flying!”

As I took my leave, Leo Mugabe informed me that diamonds had recently been discovered in eastern Zimbabwe. The find had convinced him, he said, that there was “something unique about this time, in this country.”

Robert Mugabe’s regime is hostile to Western reporters, and most of the journalists who visited Zimbabwe this summer were disguised as tourists, avoiding official contacts and possible arrest. (The *Times* correspondent Barry Bearak was detained for four days.) When I entered Zimbabwe, therefore, I proceeded with some caution. I stayed not in a hotel but in a family’s home, and I drove around Harare in a used Nissan pickup truck, dressed in an Adidas tracksuit I had bought in Johannesburg, passing for a white Zimbabwean.

There were a few ZANU-P.F. officials whom I could interview, however. More than anything else, I wanted to understand what kind of logic had led Robert Mugabe to destroy his country, and his own reputation. “He was the liberation hero of an era—a poster child for African liberation. Bob Marley played at his inauguration in 1980,” Peter Bouckaert, the emergencies director for Human Rights Watch, told me. “That’s the tragedy of what’s happened there.” Although few African leaders dared to speak out publicly against him, Mugabe, who is eighty-four, had become an object of international derision and contempt. In June, he was stripped of the honorary knighthood that Queen Elizabeth II had bestowed on him in 1994; that same day, Nelson Mandela, at his ninetieth birthday party, lamented “the tragic failure of leadership in our neighboring Zimbabwe.”

Even Morgan Tsvangirai, who has paid a hard price for his opposition to Mugabe—surviving three assassination attempts, trial for treason, and, last year, a severe beating by the police that left him with serious head injuries—told me that Mugabe inspired “divided emotions.” “He is, on one hand, the man who liberated our country from the white colonialists, and he is also this man who has murdered and repressed in a dictatorial manner,” Tsvangirai told me. “I say: he is the founding father of Zimbabwe, and the problem we have is to save the positive side of his contribution to this country, and to let history judge his negative contributions.” He added, “For me, I find it quite profound that he is quite an old man who has mismanaged his own succession.”

During my visit, I drove through farmlands that were unkempt and fallow and largely depopulated. Much of the land had been scorched by fires. Here and there, bluish tendrils of smoke curled upward from the burning bush. I passed one former white-owned commercial farm after another, their owners gone, their croplands ravaged. There were roofless barns and greenhouses, collapsed boundary fencing, and what had been plowed land dotted with squatters’ thatch-roofed huts. Groups of destitute-looking men and boys stood at the roadside selling whatever they could—onions, oranges, wooden carvings of animals—or waiting hours for the chance of a ride. There were very few cars on the roads. At checkpoints on the outskirts of Harare, policemen waved down vehicles to inspect them for illegal quantities of “mealie-meal”—ground maize, the Zimbabwean national staple. Along with the severe food shortages, there was a thriving black market, and the Mugabe government had imposed strict price controls on essential foodstuffs. Individuals caught carrying more than the legal amount of food often had to pay bribes to the police, or face confiscation of their goods.

In the weeks after the election, as the political stalemate persisted, the value of Zimbabwe’s currency plummeted. Before crossing the border from South Africa, I had exchanged a hundred American dollars for three trillion five hundred billion Zimbabwean—thirty-five billion to a dollar. Most of the cash was newly minted five-, twenty-five-, and fifty-billion-dollar notes, with pictures of giraffes and grain silos. A few days later, the going rate was a hundred billion to one. Food prices tripled overnight, and many salaries were made virtually worthless. Cash was becoming nearly impossible to obtain; banks were allowing customers to withdraw the equivalent of only one U.S. dollar per day. The effect was a state of existential madness. Prices bordered on the fantastic, and ordinary people had to grapple with calculations in the trillions for the most prosaic transactions. One day, I wandered into a supermarket to buy some water. The price for a half-litre bottle was \$1,900,000,000,000 Zimbabwean, or nineteen U.S. dollars. On a nearby shelf, I found a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black for \$83,000,000,000,000.

It wasn’t only Zimbabwe’s economy that had a looking-glass quality. In the capital, there was a semblance of outward calm—people went to work, African women walked by with loads on their heads, and pairs of white women went jogging through neighborhoods with names like Trelawney, Avondale, and Belgravia—but the tortured bodies of missing M.D.C. members were still turning up, and Tsvangirai and many of his fellow party members were living in semi-hiding. The city was plastered with campaign posters of Mugabe in a defiant pose, one fist raised, bearing the slogan “The Final

Battle for Total Control.” Notwithstanding the terror tactics that had for years been used to intimidate Zimbabwe’s media, opposition newspapers continued to be published, with front-page photographs showing victims of official violence. These were sold at Harare’s traffic lights, alongside pro-government newspapers, which reported from a parallel reality in which Comrade Mugabe was the much beloved leader of all Zimbabweans, the country’s election violence had been caused by the M.D.C., and the true reason for Zimbabwe’s economic suffering was the “illegal sanctions” imposed by the West.

The *Sunday Mail* of July 13-19th ran a front-page article headlined “FIRST LADY DISTRIBUTES TRACTORS.” There was a photograph of Grace Mugabe, the President’s second wife. (They were married in a lavish ceremony in 1996, after his first wife died of a kidney ailment; Mugabe was seventy-two and Grace, who had been his secretary, was thirty-one. At the time of the wedding, they already had two children; they have since had a third.) She was seated behind the wheel of a tractor, wreathed in jewelry and wearing a campaign shirt emblazoned with her husband’s portrait. “President Mugabe has taken it upon himself to make sure the nation is fully empowered to utilize the land,” the First Lady told the paper. “Nowhere in the world has a government distributed farm equipment to its citizens. He is doing this because he has the people at heart.” In an allusion to the war veterans, she added, “Those who died during the war did not die in vain. They died so that we can have 100 percent total empowerment.”

“Empowerment” has been one of the rhetorical pillars of Mugabe’s government, but many of the schemes to benefit black “indigenous Zimbabweans” have been used by those in positions of authority or influence to enrich themselves. For all the talk of redistribution, Mugabe and his circle have not so much broken with the past as assumed for themselves an updated version of the country-club life style once enjoyed exclusively by the nation’s whites. There are many newly built luxury villas in Harare, and a sizable number of Mercedes-Benzes and Volvos, the vehicles of choice among Zimbabwe’s black nomenklatura. (Affluent whites seem to prefer S.U.V.s.) In 2005, Mugabe and his wife moved into a new twenty-five-bedroom mansion in Borrowdale Brooke, a Harare suburb, which cost a reported ten million U.S. dollars to build. Nobody knows exactly how he paid for it, but in Harare it is received wisdom that the mansion was financed by the Chinese, to whom the President had granted lucrative mining and trade concessions. Mugabe said openly that he had the help of “foreign governments.” (He added that Malaysia’s former Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad, a personal friend, had donated tropical timber for the roof; China was reported to have supplied the shiny blue roof tiles.) Grace Mugabe has become infamous for her shopping expeditions abroad and, like Imelda Marcos, her expensive taste in shoes; she has been quoted as saying that because of her narrow feet she can “only wear Ferragamo.” Shortly after her marriage to Mugabe, Grace oversaw the construction of another mansion, called Graceland, which was allegedly built with public funds. She later sold Graceland to the Libyan government.

Another legacy of the colonial era is the cross-hatching of interests between the government and the private sector. A mining-company official I met with, a white man and a prominent figure in Zimbabwe, spoke of fending off direct requests for bribes from a senior cabinet minister, whom he described as “especially rapacious.” He confided that the executives of several mining companies had, under pressure, given large sums of money to government officials that were used to help fund the ZANU-P.F. election campaign. He added that Mugabe and his cronies would probably continue to use the threat of expropriation of the mines as a “political bludgeon” to extract bribes from mining companies. Meanwhile, he expected to see “more Chinese take over more dubious concessions.”

This kleptocratic style of government has had a trickle-down effect: corruption and graft are depressingly unremarkable in Mugabe’s Zimbabwe. Transparency International places the nation near the bottom of its global index on corruption for 2008, at No. 166 out of a hundred and eighty countries surveyed. Corruption is the key to the regime’s survival, and the economic instrument that sustains it.

**T**he First Lady’s tractor-giving munificence was also a form of patronage. The beneficiary was Zvimba, a rural district just northwest of Harare, where, on February 21, 1924, her husband, Robert Gabriel Mugabe, was born, in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia. Mugabe was the third of four sons of a Shona couple. When he was ten, his two older brothers died, and Mugabe’s father, a carpenter, abandoned the family. His mother was left to look after him, his younger brother, and his two sisters. (One of them, Sabina, Leo’s mother, was the M.P. for Zvimba, and was involved in orchestrating a number of violent land seizures.) She managed to have Robert educated at a Jesuit mission school, where he was given a scholarship by the Irish headmasters. He went on to attend a South African university, Fort Hare, where, in 1951, he obtained a B.A. in history and English literature. He spent several years teaching, and earned two more degrees, in Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), and newly independent Ghana, where the charismatic Marxist leader Kwame Nkrumah was providing inspiration and tutelage to a generation of black nationalists.

Mugabe was radicalized during his time in Ghana; he also met Sally Hayfron, his first wife. In 1960, they returned to Southern Rhodesia, and Mugabe, who had developed into a skilled orator, soon emerged as the secretary-general of ZANU, one of the country's two main black nationalist parties. The other was the Zimbabwe African People's Union, or ZAPU, led by Joshua Nkomo. ZANU's constituency was principally the Shona people, Zimbabwe's dominant ethnic group; ZAPU's support came mostly from the Ndebele, the Zulu-related tribe that inhabits southwestern Zimbabwe. And ZANU, Mugabe's party, was nominally Maoist, receiving Chinese assistance, including training by Chinese military instructors, while ZAPU adhered to Soviet policy and enjoyed Russian backing. (Key members of the ruling élite, particularly in the military, have personal ties to China that go back to those days.)

In 1964, Mugabe, who had been arrested a number of times, was charged with encouraging subversion and spent the next eleven years in prison. In 1965, as other colonies were gaining independence under black African leaders, Southern Rhodesia's colonial Prime Minister, Ian Smith, unilaterally declared independence from Britain, on behalf of the white minority (eventually proclaiming the land the republic of Rhodesia). The following year, Mugabe's only child with Sally, Nhamodzenyika, a boy of three, died of encephalitis. During his time in prison, Mugabe obtained four more degrees, including one in law, after passing correspondence courses from British and South African universities.

After his release, in December of 1974, Mugabe fled to Mozambique, to join his exiled ZANU comrades, who by then had a guerrilla force engaged in a full-scale fight against the Rhodesian Army. Some thirty thousand people are believed to have died in Rhodesia's civil war, which black Zimbabweans refer to as the Liberation War, and which whites call the Bush War. The fighting continued until 1979, when the British brokered ceasefire talks at Lancaster House, in London. Mugabe was one of the signatories to the resulting agreement, and, in February, 1980, he and his party won Zimbabwe's first general election.

Mugabe had agreed to an "independence constitution" that could not be altered for ten years: whites, who made up five per cent of the population, were granted twenty seats out of a hundred in Parliament, and, in return for a British commitment of financial assistance for a "willing seller, willing buyer" scheme to help settle landless blacks, Mugabe agreed not to touch the country's white-owned farmlands.

The land issue did not go away, however. It dated to the eighteen-nineties, when great swaths of land were granted to white settlers, while Africans were forcibly confined to designated "communal lands"; a century later, most blacks were still landless. In its first decade, Mugabe's government purchased some six and a half million acres, about a third of the white-owned land, and settled some fifty thousand families on it. But there was little follow-through, and most of the black farmers did not thrive. In 1990, Mugabe secured a constitutional amendment that allowed his government to requisition land at will, and to set the purchase price. Wrangling between the government and the white farmers ensued, with no resolution, even as expropriations proceeded in a haphazard and arbitrary fashion. The process was accompanied by corruption: Mugabe's political opponents lost farms while his allies and relatives were allocated land.

The gathering contradictions of those years laid the groundwork for a new political opposition, led by Morgan Tsvangirai. In contrast to Mugabe, who is moody and socially aloof, Tsvangirai is outgoing and warm and, at fifty-six, is a generation younger than Mugabe. His origins are equally humble: he is the son of a bricklayer, the eldest of nine children. Unlike Mugabe, he did not finish high school but went to work in a nickel mine to put his siblings through school. He became a labor organizer, and in 1988 was elected secretary-general of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions. Under Tsvangirai, the labor movement became the main vehicle for Zimbabwe's fledgling opposition, gradually taking shape, in 1999, as the M.D.C.

In the late nineties, Tony Blair's Labour government and other Western donors refused to continue subsidizing Zimbabwe's "land reform." In retaliation, Mugabe staged a constitutional referendum, in February of 2000, that would give him wider powers, including the authority to confiscate land without consultation. The M.D.C.—which, in those days, had close ties to Zimbabwe's white farmers—campaigns forcefully against Mugabe's bill, and it was defeated. A few weeks later, groups of machete-wielding so-called "war veterans" simultaneously invaded white-owned farms across the country. Mugabe made it plain that the land invasions had his blessing.

**I**n the textbooks used in Zimbabwe's public schools, the issues of land, wealth, and race are pointedly linked. In a chapter titled "Money and Wealth" in the fifth-grade social-studies textbook, there is a section that reads:

The whites took over the land. They farmed the best parts themselves, and sold their crops for money. The blacks were left with poor land, and not enough of it. They soon began to need money to buy food, because they could no longer grow enough for themselves. They also needed money to pay taxes to the white government.

But the blacks found it hard to earn much money. They had to work for the whites, and they were never paid very much. All the best paid jobs went to the whites. Unlike their ancestors, who often had many possessions, most Zimbabweans were now poor. . . . This has now changed; blacks and whites are working together in Zimbabwe.

But the results of the farm-seizure policy have been disastrous for almost all Zimbabweans. Of the forty-five hundred white-owned commercial farms that existed eight years ago, and which accounted for more than half of Zimbabwe's arable land, all but about four hundred have been taken over; most were looted and destroyed. About a dozen white farmers and many more black farmworkers have been murdered. Half a million black farmworkers have been made destitute, along with their families, having lost their jobs and their homes at the same time. (In 2005, Mugabe ordered the police to bulldoze shantytowns in Harare and other cities, where many of the black farmworkers had ended up, in an operation that he called "Drive Out Rubbish." Seven hundred thousand were left homeless.) Less than a decade ago, Zimbabwe was one of the breadbaskets of Africa, exporting maize and meat to its neighbors; today, there is no commercial agriculture to speak of. As many as three million Zimbabweans have fled to South Africa as migrant workers. (They have not been entirely welcome: last May, in an outbreak of xenophobic violence, many were killed by marauding gangs in townships in Johannesburg and elsewhere.) Life for most Zimbabweans revolves around economic survival.

"Everyone is agreed on the need for land reform; we didn't agree on the methodology," Tsvangirai told me. "The landless are still landless, freebooters are still exploiting, the selection process was wrong, and everything is chaotic." He added, "We can't go back to pre-2000, but the chaos that is taking place now cannot continue."

In an elevated parking garage in downtown Harare, I met with a war veteran whom I'll call Baltazar. He was in his late fifties, dressed in a worn houndstooth jacket. Baltazar was one of ZANU's elite Chinese-trained guerrilla cadres. He had worked directly for Mugabe at the beginning of his Presidency—and had liked him—and then for Zimbabwe's intelligence service under diplomatic cover in China, the United States, and Africa. But he had a large family, and needed money for school fees. He told me that he had been involved in the takeover of a white-owned farm. "I was one of several people working in the President's office who were offered a farm," he said. "We made an arrangement with the owner. He would do the plowing for us with his tractors, and he would give us the seed we needed, and he would keep seventy per cent of the returns." They had been there about a year and a half when, he said, "an official came out with a document saying that the area would be taken over by a big man in the government. We resisted until they called in a police support unit, and we realized it was hopeless and gave up."

Things had not worked out for the "big man," however, and Baltazar and his associates had been told that they might be able to reoccupy the land. So far, they hadn't. "We now realize we would not be able to do anything with the land without resources—we would need equipment, loans, which are not there. And, secretly, it's because we anticipate a radical change in the country and we don't want to be associated with a regime that took over land and then misused it."

Baltazar shot me a look, and said, "The occupation of land was very popular after the liberation, because the whites owned it and they were rich, and so the people, and many war vets, thought that if we took over the farms then we will automatically be well-to-do, like the whites whom we removed. We didn't realize that it took them decades to make those farms productive. Most of us now realize that farming is not a simple process."

Baltazar was defensive about the war veterans' role in the country's unfolding catastrophe. "My experience is that most are not interested in violence—those involved in violence are either pseudo-vets or opportunists." But, he conceded, "some are, and some are benefitting." One of the things that had led to the push for land, he said, was that veterans with serious injuries had received nothing from a highly publicized war victims' compensation fund, while senior officials had been given large sums for slight or imaginary wounds. Now, things had gone very far, and veterans felt obliged, because of what they had done, to back the regime at all costs: "The regime has instilled fear in the war vets that they will lose their pensions and they might face retribution from whoever might take over."

The elections in March, which Tsvangirai won by almost forty-eight per cent to Mugabe's forty-three (forcing a runoff, since neither candidate achieved an absolute majority), were a shock to Mugabe and his supporters, and led to a rush to attach blame. "ZANU-P.F. began to be too relaxed about things," Ben Moyo, a Mugabe loyalist since the sixties and a former M.P., told me. "They didn't see this party"—the M.D.C.—"as an agent of British colonialism, as a real threat, and so they didn't campaign much. I didn't, either. We thought the people would vote for us, as they always do," Moyo said. "And, meanwhile, the people forgot the vision of the liberation struggle. The people were saying, 'What good is liberation without food?' That's when we had to begin the reeducation process for the 27th of June, to remind them why it was we took up arms to fight."

The “reeducation process,” I realized, was Moyo’s euphemism for the terror camps into which thousands of people had been herded in the weeks before the June 27th runoff. Most were detained and given political lectures by ZANU-P.F. militants; many were beaten, or worse.

“I was the commander of a base camp,” Moyo acknowledged. “We brought youths to the camp. We also used them to control the black market. We feared some prices were being rigged by the opposition. It was also used to punish those people who were misbehaving, from the opposition and also from ZANU, and they’d be beaten up. But each base commander was different. At my camp, we disciplined people from our own party, but never the opposition party. The violence was not as bad as reported. Some disciplining was necessary. But one can’t deny there were abuses, especially in rural areas.”

Even so, Moyo said, the M.D.C. had grossly exaggerated the violence to make the ruling party look bad. “They are experts in the art of lying,” he said. “If a couple has a domestic dispute, the opposition party goes and takes pictures and then says, ‘This is ZANU-P.F. violence.’ And the foreign media believe it.” Moyo paused, and then appealed to me: “Look at Zimbabwe! Go around and look where these things are supposed to be happening every day. The violence here is not as bad as what we have seen in other countries in the continent. Sometimes on the satellite television channels they show images of violence that are supposed to be from here, and we can see they are really television images taken in Kenya, or from Rwanda—not Zimbabwe at all!”

Listening to Moyo’s explanations, I recalled an encounter I had had in South Africa the previous week with a twenty-three-year-old Zimbabwean refugee named Michael. He was being interviewed by Paul Verryn, a Methodist bishop who runs an asylum for Zimbabwean political refugees at Johannesburg’s Central Methodist Church. It was a filthy and overcrowded building, but it provided a refuge of last resort. On the night that I visited, more than a thousand Zimbabweans were living there; I had to step over their sleeping bodies, packed tight on every surface, including the stairways. Verryn invited me to sit in as he questioned prospective new residents. Michael, a lanky young man, stood out from the others—he appeared troubled and his body was rigid. When he spoke, he looked down, and did not make eye contact with either of us. At Verryn’s prompting, he said that he was from the town of Masvingo, and that his parents were elderly and unemployed. The breadwinner of the family had been his elder brother, but he had fled to South Africa. This had left Michael to look after his younger brother and sister by himself. “This was very hard,” he said. “I was so under pressure.”

Michael still did not look up.

“Go on,” Verryn said.

“In order to get work, I was forced to join the Youth”—the youth wing of ZANU-P.F.—“and forced to beat the people, and other things, and I became so desperate.” Michael spoke hurriedly. “And I came here to refresh myself.” He was trembling. He had run away without telling anyone, and had arrived in Johannesburg four days earlier. Verryn asked him a few more questions, and then told him that he could stay. He called an aide to give Michael an I.D. and some food. Once Michael was gone, Verryn said, “I think that young man may have killed people.”

Verryn said that there were many young refugees like Michael, soldiers and youths who had been compelled to do terrible things to other Zimbabweans. As Zimbabwe’s political violence worsened, he was seeing much anxiety and “derangement” among the recent arrivals. He speculated about the motivations behind Mugabe’s use of political terror. “I don’t think Mugabe has ‘lost it,’” he said. “I think he knows exactly what he is doing. I think he’s politically astute, and he thinks this is the way you run a country. You don’t countenance any opposition.”

**T**he diamond discovery that Leo Mugabe mentioned had occurred in the hills around the town of Mutare, near the Mozambique border. There were reports that, in rural communities in the vicinity, killing and torture at the hands of ZANU-P.F. militants and war veterans continued apace well after the election. On the town’s outskirts, in an abattoir, I met with Pishai Muchauraya, a thirty-two-year-old newly elected M.P. for the M.D.C. “Twenty-one cases of murder, eighteen in the runup and three since,” Muchauraya told me. The killers were “ZANU-P.F. and soldiers, sometimes assisted by the police.” An additional twenty-five people, he said, had disappeared. They were believed to have been murdered and dumped in a reservoir, a place called Ruti Dam. “It’s crocodile-infested,” he said.

I asked Muchauraya how he had survived. He grinned, and replied, “Ah, with difficulty.” Like all of Zimbabwe’s Members of Parliament, he hadn’t been able to take his seat, because Parliament had yet to be convened. For the time being, he lived semi-underground, sleeping in other people’s homes.

A white woman came in and, at Muchauraya’s instructions, began showing me images on a computer screen. A young

man's back was covered with what looked like a few dozen large puncture holes; they had been caused by the drips from burning plastic, Muchauraya said. Another man's buttocks were covered with suppurating wounds. It was a common form of torture in Zimbabwe: people were forced to sit on something hot, like a fire grate, and then beaten badly on their buttocks. This was humiliating as well as painful. Other victims were injured on the soles of their feet, which made it hard for them to walk.

Three local women, the wives of M.D.C. officials, had been gang-raped. In the worst incident, one of the women was raped by eighteen men. "Probably she will contract H.I.V.," Muchauraya said. "Given Zimbabwe's statistics, as many as six of the men who raped her were probably infected." As digital images of torture, abuse, and mutilation flicked by, Muchauraya looked at me and said, "As you can imagine, all of this makes the thought of reconciliation difficult. Of course we want reconciliation, but as a responsible party we cannot ignore these crimes, and the people responsible for them must be held accountable."

In July, South Africa's President, Thabo Mbeki, had come to Harare in a bid to negotiate a settlement. After first refusing to meet with Mugabe, Tsvangirai relented. He and Mugabe had dinner together, and afterward signed a Memorandum of Understanding, committing themselves to further talks. When I asked Muchauraya how he felt about all that, he bristled. "So he had dinner with Mugabe," he said. "It was obligatory. But in our view things are moving in the right way, because, by sitting down with Tsvangirai, Mugabe was also recognizing him, and that has never happened before. We have tamed the bull." Still, within the M.D.C. there were widespread worries that Tsvangirai might be outmaneuvered. (It had happened before. In the mid-eighties, faced with a restive ZAPU, Mugabe created a new Army brigade, sent it to North Korea for training, and then deployed it in a vicious counterinsurgency campaign. After an estimated twenty thousand civilians were killed, Joshua Nkomo agreed to unity talks, which led to his party's absorption into ZANU. He was given the newly created post of executive vice-president, which turned out to be largely ceremonial. When Nkomo died, in 1999, Mugabe declared him a "national hero.")

In September, a deal appeared to have been reached in which Mugabe would stay on as President while Tsvangirai would become Prime Minister and the M.D.C. would be given about half of all cabinet posts. But Mugabe made it clear that he would have all the powerful ones, including Defense, Home Affairs, and Justice, leaving the M.D.C. minor portfolios like Water Management. As of last week, the outcome was unclear.

"In an ideal world, in such negotiations, you have an honest partner, not a dishonest one. Mugabe has been dishonest," Tsvangirai told me in a phone interview last week. "Anything can happen if this falls apart—there can be unintended consequences from the people, or from people fed up within certain institutions. This is it. There is nothing else, which is why they cannot fail." Still, he wasn't sure how long his side could continue talking. "People have shown resilience, but now people's confidence is being undermined, as they see that this is a deal with a bad man," Tsvangirai said. "What I am trying to get is a good deal with a bad man."

Mugabe and his allies have long accused the M.D.C. of being little more than a Trojan horse for Western powers. In September, Mugabe complained to a crowd of his supporters, "Putting ZANU-P.F. and the M.D.C. together to work together is like mixing water and fire. It is quite difficult for these parties to be friends—especially if one party is being supported and sponsored by the outside countries that are pushing for a regime-change agenda." Speaking of himself in the third person, Mugabe added, "They want Mugabe to go. But where should he go?"

Mugabe is not entirely wrong about official U.S. and British hostility toward him. On the day that I visited James McGee, the U.S. Ambassador to Zimbabwe, a satellite television in his office was tuned to CNN, which was broadcasting live images of Radovan Karadzic from The Hague, where he was being arraigned before the International Criminal Tribunal on war-crimes charges. Karadzic had been arrested nine days before, and still wore the bushy white beard that had disguised him for years as a fugitive. With reports circulating that Mugabe and his senior aides had demanded guarantees of immunity from prosecution in their talks with the opposition, the timing seemed apt. I asked McGee whether he thought that seeing Karadzic brought to justice was alarming to Mugabe.

"Yeah," McGee said, smiling. "I happen to know for a fact that this has had Mugabe worried—and, personally, I like that."

Since assuming his post, in late 2007, McGee, a fifty-nine-year-old Vietnam veteran, had shown, for a diplomat, an unusual willingness to confront Mugabe. This has earned him the admiration of Mugabe's critics, and the enmity of the regime. In May, at the height of the political violence, McGee led a convoy of diplomats into a ZANU-P.F. reëducation camp, where, he charged, people were being tortured. This resulted in a standoff with police in which McGee leaped onto

the hood of a car and snapped pictures with his cell-phone camera. A few days later, Mugabe threatened to expel him. McGee told me that on a recent trip to Washington he had recommended pressuring Mugabe further by placing the members of ZANU-P.F. on a terror watch list. I asked if that was likely to happen.

“Nope,” McGee said, with a shrug, but he added that the United States and the European Union’s new, expanded sanctions list—the one with Leo Mugabe’s name on it—might do some good. He cited the announcement by Zimbabwe’s central-bank governor, that morning, of a new currency that had ten fewer zeros. The “new” banknotes were, in fact, old ones that had been stockpiled. McGee believed that the measure had come about because a German company had halted its shipments of banknote paper after calls for it to be placed on the E.U.’s sanctions list—the country, quite simply, was running out of paper on which to print its money. “They think it’ll buy them three months,” he said. “I don’t think it will give them more than two weeks’ breathing space.”

McGee viewed the regime’s threats to seize the mines with both anger and dismissiveness. “They’ll screw it up just like they did the agriculture with the farm invasions, and they’ll be left with nothing,” he said. “The Russians and the Chinese would take what they wanted and leave again, and it would not affect us at all. They can’t touch us. Let them do it. I’d like to see them try.”

The problem for McGee is that the U.S. has little direct leverage over Zimbabwe. Since 2005, Mugabe has sought to counter the West’s sanctions with a policy called “Look East,” and has been sustained, in part, by the trade deals he has struck with China. On July 11th, the members of the U.N. Security Council voted on a U.S.-sponsored draft resolution that called for further sanctions against Zimbabwe; China and Russia vetoed it. For the application of pressure, the U.S. has been forced to defer to Zimbabwe’s neighbors in the African Union and the Southern African Development Community, but the talk-softly approach adopted by their appointed “facilitator,” Thabo Mbeki, who is seen as partial to Mugabe, has effectively kept Mugabe in power. Mbeki was himself forced out of office in September but continued to act as mediator, with even less authority.

Mugabe is one of the last of Africa’s so-called big men, the generation of post-independence nationalist leaders who ruled their nations for decades and, with few exceptions, stifled democratic alternatives. In recent years, that has changed: Kenneth Kaunda stepped down from power in Zambia, as did Julius Nyerere in Tanzania. Both settled into roles as their countries’ grand old wise men, similar to the one enjoyed by Mandela. Mugabe, however, seems incapable of giving up. Jon Elliott, a former British Foreign Office official who now works with Human Rights Watch, suggested that the West had to take care in facilitating Mugabe’s removal without giving him an alibi for clinging to power. “Mugabe is part of the dinosaur generation, as compared with what’s happening elsewhere in Africa,” he said. “I think Mugabe wants to go, but won’t if it’s because of international pressure. The economy is in a desperate situation, so he’s looking for a deal that will bring in money and investment and buy him a grace period to choose his successor.”

The M.D.C.’s national organizing secretary, Elias Mudzuri, told me, “We are isolated here, fighting for democracy, but we need the West to help us. I am not ashamed to say this. I am not a puppet of the West.” When I met Mudzuri, he was wearing a baseball cap that said “National WW II Memorial, Washington, D.C.” on it. In 2002, he was elected mayor of Harare, but under government pressure left his job and the country. He took his family to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he earned a master’s degree in public administration at Harvard. When he returned for the recent campaign, he said, ZANU-P.F. militants went to his home village and severely beat his eighty-year-old father; several weeks later, the old man was still hospitalized.

“It’s the U.S.’s responsibility, because it is democratic, and is the most powerful country in the world,” Mudzuri said. “Don’t expect Russia and China to do it, because they are not democratic, and, meanwhile, wherever there is a dictatorship, and natural resources, they will loot our countries. That’s what they want, and they are busy establishing themselves. Look at Darfur.”

He added, “The West is afraid to be accused of being neocolonial, as Mugabe accuses it of being. But this is not what is happening. What is happening is that twelve million people are under siege by a purported liberator.” Mudzuri concluded, “Why is it O.K. to help Iraq and fund everything there, but wrong here? To leave Africa to the dictators and the looters doesn’t help you. Where is Big Brother? He is not here.”

**I**n the nineteen-nineties, Zimbabwe was an emerging destination for tourists, with such attractions as Victoria Falls, but almost no one travels there anymore. Nor do many come to see Great Zimbabwe. The citadel’s ruins—the fortified bastion, on a bluff, of the Royal Enclosure, and below it the high-walled kraal and the conical tower of the Great Enclosure, believed to have been used for sacred rites—are the largest man-made stone structures in Africa south of

Egypt. Since 1986, Great Zimbabwe has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, but on the day I went the only other visitors were several Arab men wearing tracksuits, and their wives, in head scarves and long dresses. They turned out to be off-duty diplomats from the Libyan Embassy.

Between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries, when the citadel was abandoned for reasons that remain mysterious, Great Zimbabwe was a regional power and an important trading center. Celadon utensils from China, along with glass beads and porcelain from India and Arabia, have been found there. Early Portuguese explorers brought word of its existence to Europe, but their descriptions were cloaked in myth and legend; some believed that the citadel had a connection to the Queen of Sheba, or that it was the Biblical city of Ophir. In 1889, Cecil Rhodes, the mining tycoon, was granted a royal charter by Queen Victoria to explore and settle all the lands between the Limpopo and the Zambezi Rivers. The first city founded by Rhodes's heavily armed Pioneer Column of gold-hungry settlers was Fort Victoria (now Masvingo), not far from Great Zimbabwe. Rhodes was fascinated by the ruins, and he commissioned several archeological expeditions to explore the site. These archeologists suggested that the ruins, and especially the tall stylized birds, carved from soapstone, that guarded the citadel, were evidence of an advanced white or "Semitic" civilization, possibly Egyptian or Phoenician or even the scions of "mythical inhabitants of Great Britain." (Such theories persisted well into the sixties, even though they had long been debunked.) By 1902, the year Rhodes died, all but one of Great Zimbabwe's intact soapstone birds had been looted, including one that had been given pride of place in Rhodes's elegant Cape Town home, Groote Schuur.

The soapstone birds, and Great Zimbabwe itself, came to form an indispensable part of the contested historiography of the country. Rhodes and his colonialist successors sought a white presence in the country's distant past to justify their claims to it, while the black-nationalist leaders who emerged in the sixties—men like Robert Mugabe—saw an ancient indigenous civilization as vindication of their own rights. Since 1980, all the known birds, except for Rhodes's, have been returned.

At the doorway to Great Zimbabwe's little museum, the sole attendant, a young woman, was reading a romance novel. She checked my ticket and waved me through. At the back of the dimly lit building, seven of the sphinx-like birds were perched like sentinels on stone plinths. The birds faced a wall hung with faded photographs of Robert Mugabe.

Since assuming power, Mugabe's avowed mission has been to efface Rhodes's legacy. Harare's name was changed from Salisbury, and its main boulevards have been renamed after African liberation heroes—Mandela, Samora Machel, and, of course, Mugabe. But twenty-eight years after a bronze statue of Rhodes was toppled by a mob in Cecil Square—now Africa Unity Square—there is still a Cecil Rhodes Street, and his presence is felt in other ways. "Mugabe has totally absorbed the colonial legacy," Bishop Verryn told me. "Look at his clothes and the way he speaks, his spending sprees. It's wonderful, it's amazing, given his anti-colonial rhetoric. But his radical discourse—that's what he thinks people want to hear."

Since the end of white rule, the relationship between the races has remained tentative, and unresolved. But one effect of the farm seizures is that Zimbabwe's white population has shrunk, from about two hundred thousand in 1980 to some twenty thousand now. Most of the so-called "Rhodies" emigrated to South Africa and the United Kingdom, but many have also settled in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States. In recent years, some of Zimbabwe's dispossessed white farmers have found a welcome for their agricultural skills in such African countries as Nigeria and Zambia. (Whites who, despite everything, have stayed in Zimbabwe refer to themselves, familiarly, as "Zimbos.")

For a few days, I was the guest of a white farming family, among the last remaining in the area, in a rural valley north of Harare. It was at the edge of the Great Dyke, a mineral-rich geological formation that extends for some three hundred miles across Zimbabwe. The family, whom I will call the Edwardses, were tobacco farmers. In the spring, invaders had begun moving onto their land, they said, but had been inexplicably turned back by the commander of the local ZANU-P.F. terror camp, who was also one of the most notorious war veterans in the area. The Edwardses didn't know how long they would be able to stay. Both the husband and the wife were born in Zimbabwe and had spent their entire lives there. They were taking each day as it came. Edwards told me that every morning, at the roll call he conducted for his workers, several war vets showed up. They either approached him directly or sent him written requests for things—usually fuel, or mealie-meal—through his farm manager. He generally gave them what they asked for. He estimated that it was costing him forty to sixty thousand U.S. dollars a year out of the hundred thousand that the farm earned (down from about seven hundred and fifty thousand in good times). "There is really no choice," he said. "It's either give them a version of what they want or face a militant invasion."

One day, we climbed a granite mountain near the Edwards farm to view some prehistoric San, or bushmen, cave

paintings, but found them marred by freshly scrawled graffiti. We drove past a local wildlife preserve where, at the start of the year, there had been ten white rhinos. Now there were only four; the others had been attacked with machetes or shot and left to die. (Since the beginning of the land invasions, poaching has finished off much of Zimbabwe's wildlife.) Edwards said that the culprits were believed to be poachers who would sell the horns to the Chinese miners who had recently moved into the area; powdered rhino horn is prized as an aphrodisiac in China. A couple of miles away, a Chinese-run nickel-mining camp had sprung up on a friend's confiscated land. The camp straddled a public-access dirt road that traversed the area, and we slowly drove through it. Chinese men wearing floppy hats and sunglasses were overseeing several dozen black Zimbabwean workers in blue overalls; there were Caterpillars, and rock-sifting machines, and newly erected workers' dormitories. As we drove past, the Chinese men stopped to glare at us. In the distance, we heard explosions.

**O**n September 25th, a few weeks after I left Zimbabwe, I went to see Mugabe address the United Nations General Assembly, in New York. An audible buzz of anticipation filled the hall as he approached the podium. He was reported to have come to New York with an entourage of fifty-four people, including his wife, Grace, but, despite the tentative power-sharing deal, without Morgan Tsvangirai, whose passport was being held by the authorities.

Dressed in an elegant black suit and a mauve tie, and enunciating carefully in quaintly outmoded colonial English, Mugabe spoke of the need to eradicate global poverty, and in favor of "sustainable development" and "empowerment programs" to attain social justice and political stability. He singled out his own landreform program for praise: Zimbabweans, he said, were now "masters of their own destiny," their progress hindered only by "illegal, unilaterally imposed sanctions." Mugabe proceeded to excoriate the U.S. and Great Britain for the war in Iraq. "Those who falsely accuse us of violations are themselves international perpetrators of genocide, acts of aggression, and mass destruction," he said.

In the press gallery, an African man began clapping loudly, particularly at criticisms of the U.S. When Mugabe's speech ended, a few moments later, the man was joined by twenty or thirty others—journalists from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia—who gave Mugabe a sustained round of applause. ♦

PHOTOGRAPH: AP

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