

Zimbabwe: death by silence

A five-year genocide in southern Africa from 1982 raised barely a whisper from London, Washington or the UN.

Zimbabwean journalist and genocide scholar, **Geoff Hill**, looks at a shameful episode that has yet to be resolved.

In July 2010, Mr. Melusi Matshiya was arrested in Zimbabwe's southern city of Bulawayo for trying to display his paintings of a genocide in which several of his family were killed.

Depending on who you talk to, from 1982 to 1987, between 10 000 and 40 000 people were murdered in the Matabeleland province around Bulawayo. The government is still so touchy that most of the bodies lie in mass graves and families who try to exhume them face arrest.

Robert Mugabe who ordered the killings, remains head of state, but is banned from entering the Europe, the US and a dozen other countries because of human rights abuse since 2000 and a string of rigged elections.

His party, the Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) still controls all key ministries and the army.

You can talk politics in Zimbabwe, but there are risks: In early September another young man was jailed for 10 months for "insulting the president" whom he described as old and wrinkly.

Independent newspapers are coming into print after a government monopoly that dates back to when Mugabe nationalised the press in 1981, and more political space exists now than at perhaps any time in the past 50 years ... unless you want to discuss the killings known locally as *Gukurahundi* or "a wind that blows away the chaff".

Rhodesia at war

Robert Mugabe came to power in 1980 at the end of an eight-year civil war between three forces. The country, then known as Rhodesia, had been ruled since 1890 by a minority white government. In 1965, its last white prime minister, Ian Smith, became only the second leader after George Washington to expel the British and declare his country independent.

"Their sense of humour hadn't improved in 200 years," Smith told me later. London imposed sanctions and British prime minister, Harold Wilson, predicted that Rhodesia would fall, "in weeks not months."

He was wrong and the country prospered. But whites made up only one-twentieth of the population, denying a vote to the black majority who were 70% Shona speaking, with the Matabele — an offshoot from South Africa's Zulu nation — around 25% and based in the south-west in a three-hundred kilometre belt running from the Limpopo River that forms the boundary with South Africa north to Victoria Falls on the border with Zambia.

Black resistance to Rhodesia developed into two guerrilla forces, one from the Matabele armed by Moscow and under control of former union leader Joshua Nkomo, and the other from the Shona, backed from China and led by Robert Mugabe.

In 1979, with 36 000 people dead, an equal number injured and more than a million homeless, the newly elected government of Margaret Thatcher suggested a peace conference in London, followed by British-supervised elections.

The poll went ahead and, in February 1980 amid charges of intimidation on all sides, Mugabe won 56 of the 100 seats on offer, Joshua Nkomo took 20, Smith the same number and the last four went to minor parties.

But Mugabe had his heart set on a one-party state with himself as president-for-life, a situation common in Africa at the time. Nkomo opposed him and a small number of Matabele guerrillas who were to form part of a united Zimbabwe army took up arms and returned to the bush.

Enter the Fifth Brigade

In late 1980, Robert Mugabe visited President Kim il Sung in Pyongyang and signed a secret deal for North Korean instructors to train an exclusively Shona unit that would answer to Mugabe himself. A year later, the resultant *Fifth Brigade* entered Matabeleland commanded by Lt Col. Perence Shiri (pronounced She-ree) who now heads the Zimbabwe Air Force.

In Bulawayo, Mrs Lucy Dube (pronounced Doo-beh) told me she would never forget the night they came to her village.

"I was only 10 years old, but I watched my parents, my grandmother and two of my brothers being locked into a hut by soldiers," she said. "Then they lit the grass roof and I could hear my family screaming, but there was nothing I could do."

Mrs Dube said she had been sleeping at a friend's hut less than a hundred yards away. "If I had been with my mother, I would also have been killed." She said her father had been active in local politics which is why she believed the family was targeted.

"No one can deny that this happened," she said. "The whole village was forced to watch and, after the fire, many were beaten and others were taken away by the soldiers and we did not see them again. Now we are told we cannot even look for their bodies. I can't live with that."

Her experience was typical: across Matabeleland villages were razed, locals were placed in holding camps, and no food or fuel was allowed into the province.

"There was a drought at the time," recalls Mr. Andrea Sibanda (pronounced See-bunda) of the Matabeleland Freedom Party (MFP) which campaigns on a platform of justice for Gukurahundi.

"Crops had failed, cattle were dying and the shops were empty. Hunger was everywhere. Then a curfew was declared and anyone found out of doors after sunset was shot on sight."

Opposition leader, Joshua Nkomo, fled to London and asked the British government to raise the matter at the United Nations or in the Commonwealth.

For the greater good

In 2002, for a special edition of the BBC news programme, *Panorama* journalist Fergal Keene took British leaders to task for ignoring Nkomo's plea.

Roger Martin who was deputy high commissioner to Harare at the time explained the problem.

"We had very much an eye to what was happening in South Africa with apartheid," he told Keene. "We were hopeful that Zimbabwe would be something of a contrast, and South Africans would say, "Ah yes, it is possible to work as multiracial society." So I think Matabeleland was a side issue."

On the same programme, Sir Geoffrey Howe who was foreign secretary in the 80s, said it was difficult to get information about what was going on.

"The evidence fluctuated from time to time according to where your evidence was coming from." he said.

But last year I met with veteran Conservative MP, Sir Nicholas Winterton, who had raised the genocide in Parliament.

"Of course they know. We all knew. It was in the newspapers and on TV. It was in the intelligence reports coming out of Zimbabwe," he said.

Sir Nicholas is still angry about the lack of action. "Thousands of civilians " men women and children " were being rounded up and placed in camps where they were slaughtered and the British government did nothing and worse, they said nothing," he told me.

In 1983, foreign office minister, Malcolm Rifkind visited Harare, yet his subsequent report to parliament made no mention of Matabeleland. Later that year, the Commonwealth held its biennial summit in Delhi, but nothing was said about Zimbabwe.

The University of Edinburgh gave Mugabe an honorary doctorate for his contribution to peace and the Queen knighted him (honours since withdrawn).

In Washington it was the same and both the White House and the State Department avoided the issue.

In Harare, foreign journalists who tried to raise the matter with the Zimbabwe government were harassed by the feared secret police or Central Intelligence Organization (CIO).

Australian prime minister, Malcolm Fraser had been a long-time supporter of Mugabe during the civil war and refused to comment on the massacres. Human rights activists, including many who had campaigned against Ian Smith's minority rule and had by now progressed on to the anti-apartheid movement were silent.

A senior member of the German Greens Party who visited Bulawayo during the genocide told me, "We were so keen for Zimbabwe to succeed, to show South Africa they could safely transfer to majority rule. For the greater good, we had to ignore what was happening."

At home, with the media under control of his party, there was no mention of the killings on Zimbabwe radio, TV or in the newspapers.

Mike Auret, who worked with the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Bulawayo during the civil war, played a key role in exposing abuse by Ian Smith's Rhodesian army. By 1980, he had become a fan of Mugabe.

Auret now lives in Ireland and has penned his memoirs, *From Liberator to Dictator: An Insider's Account of Robert Mugabe's Descent into Tyranny* [David Philip, Publishers].

"Part of the reason for writing the book was for me to try to gain some understanding of how so many of us so gravely misconstrued the situation," he says.

"How was it possible that so serious an error of judgement could have been made by so many people, in the world, not only in Zimbabwe?"

Auret says Mugabe's charm was hypnotic: "My admiration for him grew with each contact and I found myself putting him on a pedestal, a position from which I found it most difficult to displace him in the years that followed, despite everything that happened."

His Catholic group conducted hundreds of interviews with victims of Gukurahundi, but when they tried to publish the work in 1999, the Church refused. Mr. Auret resigned and stood as an MDC candidate and was returned to Parliament by a largely black electorate.

In 1980, at the end of the war, Mugabe had called for reconciliation. Looking back, Mr. Auret says he still can't be sure what went wrong.

"I remembered the reasonable man and wondered if he had changed or if indeed he had always been so evil, but simply more adept at hiding it."

The Matabele massacres ended in 1987 when Joshua Nkomo agreed to dissolve his political structures and join ZANU-PF, creating a virtual one-party state. He died in 1999.

Was Gukurahundi a genocide"

Dr. Gregory Stanton, past President of the International Association of Genocide Scholars and current President of Genocide Watch believes there is nothing to debate.

"Gukurahundi cannot be defined as anything other than genocide," he says.

Dr Stanton has drawn up a list of the elements present in Matabeleland which, he says, put the case beyond dispute:

- intentional killing of a significant part of an ethnic group
- mass murder and mass rape
- no legal protection for victims (police actually tortured and killed some of those who registered complaints)
- government soldiers acting on official orders that were illegal under Zimbabwe's own constitution and under international law, including the Genocide Convention

But in Washington, Mr. Jonathan Elliott, Africa Advocacy Director for Human Rights Watch, says the matter doesn't end there.

"It is not just the killings we should be investigating, but the global silence that allowed it to happen," he said.

"The term, "Never Again" will only mean something when we act to stop soldiers slaughtering civilians on the orders of government, and ultimately hold those responsible to account."

Mr Elliott said the argument that criticizing Mugabe may have weakened moves to end apartheid is irrelevant.

"That position cannot be defended," he said. "There are absolutely no circumstances in which holding silent about mass murder can be for some greater good. The story of Matabeleland should act as a warning to leaders who ignore an atrocity they could and should have stopped."

In 1999, with rising food prices and unemployment above 70%, riots broke out in Harare, and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, led by former miner Morgan Tsvangirai, called a general strike.

With his union colleagues, Mr. Tsvangirai formed a new political party, The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and looked set to win elections due in 2000.

ZANU-PF responded with a campaign of violence in which they:

- set up torture bases across the country
- burned homes
- over-ran farms owned by whites who were seen as sympathetic to the opposition
- declared entire areas of the country no-go zones for the MDC
- arrested journalists who wrote stories critical of government

More than 200 people are alleged to have been killed, mostly from MDC.

ZANU-PF won the vote with a narrow majority though many western countries refused to recognise the result, but Jonathan Elliott sees a link to Gukurahundi.

"When the world turned a blind eye to Matabeleland, Mugabe may have expected to get away with the second round of carnage he inflicted on the whole of Zimbabwe," he said.

"The international community must learn that impunity for serious crimes entrenches a culture of violence and abuse."

2010: a sense of impunity

In March 2008, ZANU-PF lost a general election to the MDC. Tsvangirai, a Shona like Mugabe, had declared that his government would mount a thorough investigation into Gukurahundi.

The next round three months later was a vote for president, but the situation became so violent that Tsvangirai withdrew and Mugabe stood as the sole candidate. Two years later, the MDC is junior partner in a power-sharing deal where the army, police, state media and CIO are run by ZANU-PF.

"They are scared of being sent to The Hague which is where they belong," says the MFP's Andrea Sibanda. "To be honest, we would like to break away and make Matabeleland independent like Eritrea or Kosovo. It is the only way we will ever believe this can't happen again."

Fresh elections are likely over the next year or two, and already ZANU-PF is setting up militia camps in rural electorates.

In August, an independent newspaper, *The Zimbabwean*, published a Q&A with some of Mugabe's campaigners, one of whom said the party would have little problem rigging the vote.

"At every police station, the officer in charge is ZANU," he said. "Every army commander for even a small a unit, all the bosses at CIO, even in far places away from Harare, they are chosen by ZANU." he said.

"Voters are afraid and they know that if the soldiers come, no one will help them."

Greg Stanton has no doubt this culture of violence has its roots in Matabeleland.

"Never imagine that you can stay silent just this once, and the problem will go away," he said

"This is why we set up tribunals to try perpetrators when national courts will not. And it is why the International Criminal Court is essential and why it was right to issue an arrest warrant for President Bashir of Sudan."

And he warns that bringing true democracy to Zimbabwe will not be easy.

"That sense of impunity is still strong, and I doubt it will end until Mugabe and his murderers are sent to prison where they belong."

In Harare the Board of Censors has now officially banned art displays relating to Gukurahundi, so it is unlikely that Melusi Matshiyá's work will be shown, though he hopes to find a sponsor for an exhibition in Europe, the US and South Africa.

While he awaits a trial date, legal experts predict the charges will be dropped. Mr. Matshiyá's lawyers are expected to present graphic evidence of the genocide to show why the display of his art is in the public interest and it may more comfortable for the state just to let it go.

But Lucy Dube senses a change. "For 25 years there has been silence on what was done to us," she said. "Now our voices are growing louder.

"We will shout until everyone hears us, at home and around the world and we will not stop until justice is done."

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Geoff Hill reports from Johannesburg for *The Washington Times*. He has written two books on Zimbabwe and is on the advisory council of the International Association of Genocide Scholars.