



Update on Recent Events in Zimbabwe

James McGee, U.S. Ambassador to Zimbabwe

Via Teleconference Call
Zimbabwe
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OPERATOR: Good morning. And thank you for standing by. All parties will be in listen-only until the question and answer session of today's conference. At that time, if you would like to ask a question, please hit *1 on your touch-tone phone. I would like to introduce your first speaker for today, Mr. Tom Casey. Sir, you may begin.

MR. CASEY: Okay. Good morning, everybody. I'm sure you've all seen some of the latest reporting out of Harare, as well as aware of the actions taken by the UN Security Council yesterday. We wanted to give you all an opportunity to hear directly from Ambassador McGee. Again, I know you've -- many of you have spoken with him on a couple of other conference calls that we've arranged. We thought it was appropriate at this point to have him talk to you a little bit, give you a bit of an update on the situation on the ground as he sees it, and answer what questions you might have about the activities that he and his embassy staff are engaged in. So Mr. Ambassador, I want to turn it over to you, sir.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Thank you, Tom. We're pleased to be here today. The situation in Zimbabwe still remains fairly critical. The violence and the intimidation continue in both the urban and the rural areas. I think most people would probably be interested, though, in hearing the latest update that we have on Morgan Tsvangirai himself.

I just got off the phone with my colleague, the Dutch Ambassador, who told me that Morgan is still at his embassy. The Ambassador had met with the Permanent Secretary from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs here, who gave assurances that the Government of Zimbabwe would not try to raid the Dutch Embassy and that there was no threat to Morgan Tsvangirai's person. As a matter of fact, the Permanent Secretary said that Morgan Tsvangirai could leave the country if he so desired. I think the Permanent Secretary forgot that the government confiscated Morgan's passport when he returned from South Africa and has not returned it. So, Morgan is going to have a very difficult time trying to leave the country.

Key events, we've had 2,000 people that we're trying to deal with, 2,000 refugees from Harvest House, which is the headquarters of the Movement for Democratic Change here in Zimbabwe. People who have been dispossessed from their homes and the countryside made their way into the city. They've been holed up there in a building with one bathroom, very little running water. And the police came in to raid the premises yesterday. Fortunately, we were able to get word to the people that the police were on the way. And the majority of these people left, disbursed around the city, and the police still arrested about 30 people who were either too old or too infirm to get out in a hurry. They -- we have no idea where these folks are right now. They may be in a prison outside of the city. We think that they've just been dropped off in fields along the roadside outside the city.

So again, the situation still remains bad. People are starting to filter back into Harvest House and we're working with the United Nations, the ICRC and other western missions to try to find food and shelter for these folks.

Tom, why don't I stop there and see if there are any questions on where we are so far.

MR. CASEY: Okay. Sure. Let's see if we can ask.

OPERATOR: Thank you. If you would like to ask a question at this time, please hit *1 on your touch-tone phone. You will be announced prior to asking your question. Our first question comes from Donna Bryson.

QUESTION: Good morning, Mr. Ambassador. You said that the Dutch --

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Hi, Donna.

QUESTION: Hi. You said the Dutch Ambassador spoke to the Permanent Secretary who said that Morgan Tsvangirai could leave the country. Don't you find that a little ominous that he said he could leave the Embassy and stay in the country? Or are they saying that they think Morgan Tsvangirai should leave the country?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: I can't answer that, Donna. I'm relating secondhand information on this one from a conversation between the Dutch Ambassador and Ambassador Bema (ph), the Permanent Secretary. Right now I think that Morgan probably can leave the Embassy and stay in the country. But before that happens, his security people will make an assessment of the situation and advise Mr. Tsvangirai on which way to go.

QUESTION: And this is getting beyond what you were talking about earlier, but are you getting any sense that there are moderates within ZANU-PF who might take this opportunity to come forward? Is there any sense that they're going to try to negotiate, try to move Mugabe out of the center?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Donna, that's a difficult question to assess. There are several power factions, several factions within ZANU. We've probably noted at least four different power factions within ZANU-PF. We just don't have enough contact with those different factions within ZANU to say what their motivations might be and how they're likely to respond to this current crisis.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Viola Gienger, you may ask your question.

QUESTION: Hello, Mr. Ambassador. This is Viola Gienger from Bloomberg News. What do you see as -- what is going to happen in the next couple of days? What -- how do you think this is going to unfold? And also, do you see any further pressure or do you know what South Africa could do, just technically, at this point, to try to put any sort of effective pressure on Mugabe? Is there anything they really could do at this point?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Thank you, Viola. I think it's very clear. They -- we've had a very clear voice from the international community, the Presidential Statement out of the Security Council yesterday, which firmly placed the blame for everything that's happening here in Zimbabwe on the Mugabe regime. We would like to see that type of clear statement continue. And if we could get something as firm and as hard-hitting out of SADC, it would be extremely, extremely good for everything that's happening here in Zimbabwe and the region.

Now, how is this going to play out there in Zimbabwe? It's difficult to say. Right now, what we do know is that ZANU-PF continues in full campaign mode. It's -- we've received reports that ZANU will force people to vote on Friday and also take action against those who refuse to vote. So they're saying we want an election at all costs,

we want to validate Mr. Mugabe's victory here. So it's -- MDC's withdrawal was regrettable, but it's very understandable. The people of MDC were being massacred. And unfortunately, as I said right at the beginning, the violence has not abated. We're still seeing large, large amounts of violence and, you know, we're just hoping that this situation will calm down in the next few days.

QUESTION: What specifically could South Africa do? I mean, what -- other than making statements, at this point, what could they actually do to have any effect on Mugabe?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Well, I think that, again, the -- SADC regional -- leaders in the SADC region need to come out with a clearer statement, just like we've had from the United Nations, that this is an illegitimate regime that's conducting an illegitimate election. Mr. Tsvangirai has asked to make this election null and void and we agree that that's probably the best course.

The Government of Zimbabwe started out by breaking its own laws back in April, when they did not announce the results 21 days after the March 29th election. So, you know, we start -- and we've been going downhill, especially with the violence, ever since then. So I think it's very clear that SADC, and South Africa as being one of the major members in SADC, take the lead and condemn this government, number one, for the violence; and number two, for the lack of political space that would have allowed Mr. Tsvangirai to conduct an election campaign.

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Sure

OPERATOR: Sylvie Lanteaume, you may ask your question?

QUESTION: Good morning, Mr. Ambassador. You spoke about 2,000 people, refugees, from the MDC. Where are they exactly? Are they on the compound of the American Embassy?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: No, no, Cynthia. They are at a place called Harvest House, which is the headquarters of MDC. It's located about a mile from our Embassy, right at the center of downtown Harare. It's a commercial building. MDC has had it as their headquarters for several years now. I believe there are six or seven stories to Harvest House, and the stairs are just jam-packed with people. You can't even walk up. The elevator rarely works in the building, and right now, you can barely get up to the executive offices on the seventh floor because there's so many people living in the stairwells.

It's a horrible situation. We're working with church groups to try to find places where we can move these people away from the downtown area. The problem with that is that these youth militia have started to threaten some of the people who've been working with us. We had one church group working with us. They were paid a visit and said, if you continue to work with the international community, there will be a problem for you and your members. So they had to back away.

We've opened negotiations with other church groups, and once we can find a location for these people, then we have commitments from the UN family and from the ICRC to provide food and shelter for these refugees.

QUESTION: Okay.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Excuse me. They're not refugees. They're internally displaced people, IDPs.

QUESTION: And do you think they are threatened by the regime?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: The regime continues to raid. There was definitely a raid at Harvest House yesterday. As I mentioned before, the majority of the people were able to depart before being apprehended by the police. Those who weren't, we just have no idea what's happened to them. So yes, I think that these people will continue to be harassed by the police.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Michelle Kellerman, you may ask your question.

QUESTION: Yes, thanks. I'm with National Public Radio. I wanted to ask -- the Zimbabweans keep saying the elections are going to go ahead on Friday, that -- despite a very clear message from the UN Security Council and from Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. I wonder what you're doing diplomatically to try to make sure these elections don't go forward. And if they do, are there going to be monitors?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Michelle, there's really nothing that we can do here in the international community to stop these elections. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, the ZEC, has said that the elections will go forward. Their cut audit is that even if Mr. Tsvangirai sends in a letter saying that he has officially withdrawn from this process, that he had to do it 21 days prior to the election, so there will be an election on Friday, no matter what, no matter what. You know, how free and fair it is, I think that's very simple to see that there's -- that violence and intimidation all the way, going back six weeks, and there's just no opportunity for free, fair expression of the will of the people here in Zimbabwe.

QUESTION: Are you gearing up then for -- as you were saying, that you're worried that they're going to be forcing people to the polls, attacks on people if they don't go to the polls. How are you gearing up then monitor-wise to make sure there's at least some eyes on the situation?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: That's going to be very difficult. We have requested and we really would like to see -- we'd like to urge the international monitors and observers who are already here on the ground from SADC, from the African Union. We have close to 500 observers between those two organizations who are on the ground right now. Many of them have already been out in the countryside and many of them have already started to report on the intimidation and violence that they've witnessed out there. So we're hoping that these people will stay in the country and at least provide, as you mentioned, eyes-on-the-ground security for the people of Zimbabwe.

QUESTION: Just one quick thing before I let you go. That's -- you were distributing videos last week. And I wonder if you plan to continue doing things like this, and if you're fearful that you might get kicked out of the country for doing things like that.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Yeah. We were doing a routine drive around the city, taking a look at what was happening. We happened to drive through a neighborhood called Epworth, which is a high-density suburb about 15 kilometers outside of Harare, when we came across this violence. And we were just fortunate that one of the people in the -- in a follow vehicle did have a video camera and we were able to get these very compelling shots that you've seen now. You know, it was nothing intended, but whenever we have an opportunity to do something like that, we will take that opportunity.

And to answer your last question, no, I'm not afraid of being kicked out -- PNG-ed, I believe, is the official term -- from the country. We continue to do our job. There's nothing to say that -- you know, when we see random acts of violence, we shouldn't report on it. As a matter of fact, I think that's one of the major issues, one of the major things that any diplomatic mission should be doing in the situation that we find ourselves here in Zimbabwe.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Richard Roth you may ask your question.

QUESTION: Mr. Ambassador, Richard Roth from CBS News in London. Based on your conversation with your Dutch colleague and your knowledge of the situation, what risk do you think Mr. Tsvangirai faces now, were he to leave the refuge of the Dutch Embassy?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Richard, I would like to say that I take the Government of Zimbabwe at their word, but from the violence that we've seen perpetrated against innocents, people who have done nothing more than vote their conscience. And, in many cases, people who even voted for ZANU-PF in this last election, have been brutalized. So right now, I don't have a lot of faith in anything that this government says. So, I really would urge Mr. Tsvangirai to take a very careful look at the analysis conducted by his security people before he makes any decisions on how he's going to move about this country.

QUESTION: Has the Dutch Ambassador, sir, told you that their invitation to him is open-ended?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Yes. He said that Mr. Tsvangirai can stay as long as he needs.

QUESTION: Has the U.S. extended a similar invitation to him or to any of his people?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: It was not necessary. We never got that far. There were several embassies who were pretty much in line before we ever even had a chance to discuss that.

QUESTION: Do you know if it's true that he was being pursued or that his house was about to be raided by troops when he sought refuge?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: I have no information to confirm that. I had actually met with Mr. Tsvangirai, along with several other of my diplomatic colleagues, on Sunday afternoon about 4 o'clock, 4:00 p.m. And the -- what I can say is this, is that Mr. Tsvangirai's spokesperson, George Sibotshiwe -- he's a personal aid, excuse me, to Morgan Tsvangirai and a spokesperson for MDC. George has fled the country after narrowly escaping four armed men who came to a safe house to accost him. George has been on the run since Friday of last week and, fortunately, was able to get out of the country before he was injured or killed.

QUESTION: You, sir, and through you, the U.S. Government, have taken a higher profile in the past several days. Do you feel that that has increased the risk for foreign diplomats, for American diplomats, currently in Harare?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: No, I don't believe that at all, Richard. We are not doing this unilaterally. We have tremendous support throughout the entire diplomatic community. The British Embassy -- the British Ambassador travels with us on many of our trips, the Japanese, the European Union, the Dutch. We've even had success in getting some of our African colleagues to travel outside of town with us, and even independently. I was speaking with the Tanzanian Ambassador who had been stopped seven times during a recent trip to a town called Mutare, which is about 200 kilometers outside the city. So these people are seeing first-hand the same thing, experiencing first-hand the same things that we are. So I don't think it's any more dangerous for diplomats because of our actions. What I do believe is our actions have shown diplomats that maybe we should be out and about more than we had been in the past.

QUESTION: Thank you.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Sure.

OPERATOR: Sarah Childress, you may ask your question.

QUESTION: Thanks. I'm Sarah Childress from *The Wall Street Journal*. Mr. Ambassador, I wanted to ask you and -- you know, if South Africa and SADC actually did come out with, you know, some strong statements like the ones that you are calling for, what kind of impact do you think it would actually have on Mugabe and his government? I mean, do you think it would -- he would listen? How much influence do they have on him at this point?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: I think the regional bodies have a tremendous amount of influence, maybe even a lot more influence than international bodies would have on Mr. Mugabe. Zimbabwe's a landlocked country and it's surrounded by members of the SADC region. You know, there's a lot of pressure that can be brought on Zimbabwe, very simple pressure that can be brought upon Zimbabwe by the SADC countries. So, yes, I think Zimbabwe would listen to strong statements coming out of SADC much sooner than they'd listen to even, say, what's coming out of the United Nations.

QUESTION: Mm-hmm. And by pressure, do you mean going beyond statement -- sanctions or something like that?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: As example, I mean -- and this is all because we have no indication that SADC is moving towards these right now, but -- you know, border closings, a ban from SADC, all events -- benefits of SADC. You know, there's so many things that could be brought to bear that would have a tremendous and immediate impact on the Government of Zimbabwe.

QUESTION: Okay. But there's no indication at this point that (inaudible).

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: At this point, there's no indication that --

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: No, not at all, Sarah.

QUESTION: Okay, thank you.

OPERATOR: Elise Labott, you may ask your question.

QUESTION: Thank you, Ambassador. Is there any indication at all that the top military brass could move against Mugabe, especially if they go on any sanctions list? And is there any indication there's discontent within the middle ranking officers of the military?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Sarah, many of the -- I'm sorry, Elise, many of these people are already on the sanctions list. And no, there is no indication that we have right now that the military would move (inaudible). We do have fairly strong reports that the military (inaudible) is pulling a lot of the strings, making decisions on what's happening, especially with the violence that's going on (inaudible) in the countryside. This was -- let no one think anything else about this, it's a purely military exercise, the violence that was perpetrated against the people in the countryside. So the military has its hands in this.

QUESTION: Thank you.

OPERATOR: Charles Smith, you may ask your question.

QUESTION: Hi. Yes, Mr. Ambassador, there were talks of a possible genocide and signs of a genocide. Do you agree with that? And how can the world prevent a genocide? Of course, then we need something much stronger than statements to stop it.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Charles, I don't believe that we can use the word genocide for what's happened here in Zimbabwe so far. What we're looking for is a peaceful solution so that the situation does not escalate to a point where we could start to look at something like genocide here in Zimbabwe. What we're looking at right now is uncontrolled political violence that's being perpetrated against the people of Zimbabwe for political and financial gain.

No, we're not there yet on something I think that we can even (inaudible) remotely to call genocide yet.

QUESTION: Okay.

OPERATOR: Paul Eckert, you may ask your question. Mr. Eckert, your line is open.

QUESTION: Oh -- oh, thank you. Sorry. Good morning, Ambassador. Thank you. The question -- my question is: What will the United States do specifically? What steps will it take if the government goes ahead with this runoff and Mugabe declares himself the winner?

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Well, Paul, I think you're going to probably have to ask people at a higher level than me back in Washington on that policy issue. But you know, right now, I'm going to say that -- you know, we look at this as an illegitimate government and we will continue to move in that direction. Our policy will move in a direction that you would expect us to when dealing with an illegitimate government.

OPERATOR: At this time, we have no further questions.

MR. CASEY: Okay. Well, that being the case, Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much for joining us again this morning. Thank you, everyone for participating in this. I expect we'll have an opportunity to have some further conversations as the situation develops there.

AMBASSADOR MCGEE: Thanks, Tom, we appreciate it. Thanks, folks.

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