



## Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

### **Background on Zimbabwe February 2010**

*We, as leaders of the Church, are committed to help this country achieve normalcy. As the theme of the Second African Synod encourages us, we commit the Church to be in the service of reconciliation, healing, justice and peace. The Church aspires for the greater justice of the Kingdom, which goes beyond law; it is a virtue. It does not deny human justice, but integrates it and transcends it. In this way, justice becomes a path leading to forgiveness and true reconciliation, and thereby restoring communion.*

--Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop Conference Statement: National Healing and Reconciliation, October 1, 2009

#### **BACKGROUND**

Over the last ten years the government of Zimbabwe, led by President Robert Mugabe, has carried out a reign of repression over this once free and prosperous country of 12.5 million people. The once vibrant economy has been destroyed and inflation has risen to the highest level in the world, 231,000,000% according to the BBC. The economy shrank by 60%; unemployment is about 85%; and 90% of the population lives in poverty. Up to a third of the country's population fled the country for political and economic reasons and has taken refuge in neighboring countries, Europe and the U.S. Over this period, health conditions in Zimbabwe deteriorated. The HIV infection rate is 25%; life expectancy has plummeted from 60 years in 1990 to 37 years today. Hospitals have been shut down and medical supplies are scarce. Qualified medical personnel are leaving the country or working privately at high costs affordable only by the wealthy in Harare, the capital. The crumbling infrastructure, particularly the water system, has contributed to cholera outbreaks that killed many.

The situation deteriorated further in the wake of the March and June 2008 elections. The runoff held in June drew international condemnation because of a campaign of intimidation and violence. Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), withdrew citing political violence. Although Mugabe was reelected with 85.5% of the vote, the election gave the government little or no legitimacy inside or outside Zimbabwe. In September 2008, Robert Mugabe, Morgan Tsvangirai and Robert Mutambara (head of the breakaway MDC-M party) negotiated a power-sharing Global Political Agreement whereby Mugabe retained the presidency, Tsvangirai became prime minister, and Mutambara became deputy prime minister. The new "government of inclusion" represents a difficult compromise for all parties. It is a real dilution of power for President Mugabe after 30 years of rule and the prime minister's position is a step down for Tsvangirai who won the March 2008 Presidential election. The government was sworn into power in February 2009.

Since then, the two rivals have clashed repeatedly over important issues. President Mugabe refused to relinquish control of the Ministry of Home Affairs, which commands the police. Mugabe's party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), already had retained control of the military and state security. The President also refused to swear in provincial governors, most of whom are MDC members. Land reform has been stalled. Although restrictions on the press have been loosened, media legal reforms have not been passed. In December 2009 the government did agree to establish three separate commissions on reform of the electoral process, the media and human rights. Throughout the year, ZANU-PF has continued to intimidate MDC leaders. The Southern African Development Community (SADC), an alliance of nine states in Southern Africa, continues to mediate between the two rival parties in order to keep the country in relative stability, but has been unable to build broad agreement between the parties and move the country out of its current state of stagnation.

Despite political infighting and deadlock, the country's economic situation has improved. In January 2009 almost 7 million people depended on food aid. After a relatively good harvest in 2009, the UN estimates that only 2 million people will need food assistance; however, malnutrition rates among children are still unacceptably high. The Zimbabwean currency was abandoned in favor of international currencies -- the U.S. dollar, the British

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pound, the Euro and the South African Rand. The shops and stores are now full of goods, but at prices that place them out of the reach of the poor. As a result, many people have become what the UN calls “circular migrants,” leaving Zimbabwe for South Africa or Botswana to purchase basic food and household commodities and returning while others leave Zimbabwe for jobs in order to send remittances back to their families.

The inauguration of the inclusive government also led to a decrease in tensions and a reduction in violence and intimidation. Most Zimbabweans have welcomed this transition period as an opportunity to bring the country back to peace and prosperity and ultimately to promote national healing and reconciliation. In October of 2009 the Bishops of Zimbabwe issued their latest statement “National Healing and Reconciliation: God Can Heal the Wounds of the Afflicted.” The document is a powerful recounting of past mistakes. It recognizes that all the people of Zimbabwe bear responsibility for the current situation and calls for national healing and reconciliation.

The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference (ZCBC) put their statement into action by creating two important initiatives. The first launched a nationwide, grassroots consultation process on reform of the national constitution. Through the network of dioceses the ZCBC will collect ideas on how to reform the constitution in order to build and protect real democracy and human rights in Zimbabwe. The second initiative will attempt to rebuild social cohesion after years of political intimidation and systematic violence. The program hopes to build reconciliation between people who have suffered from the violence and those who perpetrated it. The Church in Zimbabwe believes this kind of reconciliation is needed to finally and fully end the violence and tension that have continued since the beginning of the government of inclusion. Without this long-term work of reconciliation, no lasting and sustainable peace is possible.

## **USCCB POSITION**

The USCCB has worked closely with and supported the leadership of the Church in Zimbabwe. USCCB’s Solidarity Fund for the Church in Africa allocated \$50,000 to the Constitutional Reform Project. In March 2009, Bishop Howard Hubbard, Chair of the USCCB Committee on International Justice and Peace, wrote to the Bishops of the Southern Africa Bishops’ Conference (SACBC) in support of their calls to the international community to monitor closely the new government of inclusion in Zimbabwe and to ensure that it meets the basic human needs of its people. Bishop Hubbard also wrote a letter to Secretary of State Hilary Clinton to convey the statement from the SACBC and to support the bishops’ message. Bishop John Ricard visited Zimbabwe in August 2009 to meet with their Bishop’s Conference and visibly expressed the U.S. Conference’s solidarity with the Church of Zimbabwe.

## **ACTION REQUESTED**

The USCCB urges the U.S. Government to:

1. Assist and encourage the Southern African Development Community to provide effective leadership, pressure and mediation to bring a peaceful end to the political deadlock and crisis in Zimbabwe.
2. Work with the international community, especially the United Kingdom, the European Union, China and Russia, to pressure the government of inclusion to resolve their political differences peacefully and to build a legitimate government that will serve the common good of the Zimbabwean people.
3. Increase humanitarian assistance to the millions of Zimbabweans who are suffering.
4. Stand ready to support a responsible transition to a new, legitimate, democratic government in Zimbabwe and to build a renewed and vibrant civil society.
5. Provide support to the important efforts to draft a new constitution that guarantees people’s basic human rights and to develop a long-term program of national healing and reconciliation.
6. Continue to support the millions of Zimbabwean refugees living in difficult conditions in the region.

**For information:** visit <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/callafrica/zimbabwe.shtml> or contact *Stephen Hilbert*, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3149, [shilbert@usccb.org](mailto:shilbert@usccb.org).

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