

Zimbabwe suddenly looks like it has been in a war. The shops are empty, there is little traffic and everyone is walking around in a daze. People stop me and ask what is going on? Well just remember Pol Pot. He came to power in Cambodia in the mid seventies, launched what they called the Khmer revolution and in a matter of months they reduced the capital city to a shell occupied by 25 000 people – down from two million.

In the process they had killed hundreds of thousands of skilled and experienced Cambodians, forced millions into the rural areas where they were required to undergo re-education and make a living from subsistence agriculture. It will take Cambodia millennia to recover after this rapacious and ideologically driven regime was removed from power by military intervention.

People outside Zimbabwe have no idea of just what has happened in Zimbabwe in the past month. Conditions have gone from difficult to impossible. I am not exaggerating when I say there are no basics – no flour, no maize meal, no cooking oil, no margarine, no matches, no fuel, no meat, no eggs. On top of this there are widespread shortages of water and electricity. I simply do not know how people are surviving.

These terrible conditions are being deliberately created in a Pol Pot style operation that is supposed to be dealing with run away inflation. Its real goals lie elsewhere.

We now know that this operation was planned a long time ago – probably as soon as it became apparent that elections would have to be held in March 2008. This is no knee jerk reaction to inflation, or to remarks by the US Ambassador about regime change. It began with an exercise to generate a sudden spurt in inflation. This was achieved when the State started buying foreign currency on the open market in June, using freshly printed currency.

In a week of frenzied activity the price of the US dollar went from about Z\$70 000 to Z\$400 000. Importers and industrialists were forced to raise prices to cover the replacement cost of stocks.

The State then unveiled its “operation good governance”. Under secret orders, the security forces were instructed to impose price reductions on all businesses. There was no legal basis for these instructions – just orders to go into firms on a systematic basis and order them to cut

prices or else. Managers and owners were specifically targeted to intimidate them into compliance. These have been arrested in their thousands, abused and held over in filthy, overcrowded cells with ordinary prisoners.

Trillions of dollars of stock values were slashed from prices, no rational basis for these price cuts were sought or tolerated. Suddenly firms faced the situation where they could not restock, could not manufacture and sell for a profit – most of their established products were now being priced into the market at below cost. The more you produced, the faster your demise.

Fuel was priced at half its landed cost and overnight some Z\$400 billion in stock values was lost as customers scrambled to buy cheap fuel at half price or less. All imports stopped.

The prices of all staple foods was likewise set at half or less the cost of production and when stocks ran out there was nothing to sell.

Now many theories have been put out about this operation – it was popularist is one, “they are preparing for the elections and forcing firms to cut prices is an attempt to curry favor with voters”. Many actually say it was about time that business was brought to heel – a reaction to the sharp price hikes caused by the first stage of this operation. It is too early for that to be the real reason; they see it as one outcome, but with little long-term value in their strategy.

My own view, based on what I know about the background, is that this is a carefully planned and ruthless exercise to reduce the urban voting population, undermine the remaining support base of the MDC and take full control of the population and the economy in time for the March 2008 elections.

The dismantling of the commercial farm industry has reduced the voting population on commercial farms from 2 million to about 600 000 and all of them are now under the control of either the State or Zanu PF elements who can dictate how they vote. These resettled areas are virtually no go areas for the MDC.

In Communal areas the food supply has been brought under control and direction, as has all

other essentials for survival including the right of abode. Traditional leaders are tightly controlled by the State and are now under close supervision by resident CIO operatives who watch their every action. They have been through three elections and now believe that they can control the vote in these areas by these means. They are probably right.

So the remaining threat is the urban vote. Now in the majority, with over 6 million people living in urban areas, the towns and cities are the last remaining centers of opposition. So like Pol Pot, the powers that be, in this case the small coterie of leaders surrounding Mugabe and the people involved in the Joint Operations Command, have decided to do some surgery.

When this operation is concluded they hope to have reduced the urban population by as much as half, destroyed or taken over all major firms in the private sector and facilitated the takeover of all other surviving firms by loyal Zanu PF supporters. They are deliberately halting food supplies to the cities, destroying jobs and the transport industry. They will then take the pick of the commercial and industrial infrastructure that remains – intact, almost as if a neutron bomb had been used, and move on from there.

The remaining urban population would then be in the same position as the population in the rural areas – under tight control and able to vote only under supervision.

Then Zanu can allow an election to take place – probably in March as planned, even with observers for the last few days of the campaign and during the vote itself. Zanu feels confident that it can win a clear majority – even a two-thirds majority vote under such circumstances. The only other issue is what happens to the three million Zimbabweans displaced by this ruthless, but clever scheme.

Most of them will swim the Limpopo or cross the border at Beitbridge. Once in South Africa, or Botswana, or Zambia or the UK or the USA, they will settle down, breathe a sigh of relief to be somewhere where sanity prevails and try to make a living, any sort of living. They will gradually be assimilated and will start sending small sums of money “home” to keep their relatives alive in Mugabe’s national detention camp. Most importantly, they will not be able to vote.

What remains of Zimbabwe will be a sea of poverty and subsistence activity with Party controlled islands of prosperity. A few foreign firms will be allowed to exploit our resources

under close supervision and control and the output used to support the lifestyles of the new elite who will continue to enjoy the luxury and pleasures that have become their norm in recent years on the gravy train. It has nothing to do with price control.

*Written by:* Eddie Cross, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

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Frontline Fellowship  
P O Box 74  
Newlands 7725  
[admin@frontline.org.za](mailto:admin@frontline.org.za)  
[www.frontline.org.za](http://www.frontline.org.za)