

Nigeria calls on Australia to reinstate Zimbabwe in Commonwealth

Below is a letter from Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo to Australian Prime Minister Ron Howard, appealing for Zimbabwe to be reinstated into the Commonwealth. This edited version appeared in Business Day, 13 February 2003.

Dear Prime Minister

I am writing to you at this time in continuation of our consultations and especially to brief you on issues on which we have been engaged relating to Zimbabwe. This briefing has become necessary following my recent visit to South Africa where I had extensive discussions with President Thabo Mbeki, President of the Republic of South Africa, and then to Zimbabwe where I was engaged in very useful and constructive exchange of views with President Robert Mugabe. President Mbeki seized the opportunity of my visit to brief me on his recent trip to Britain, including his discussions with Prime Minister Tony Blair on Zimbabwe.

You may recall Mr Prime Minister that Zimbabwe was one of the issues discussed at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Coolumb, Australia, in February 2002 as a result of which a troika was established to follow up on the matter. Soon afterwards, we had our first meeting at the Marlborough House in London in March 2002 to consider the report of the Commonwealth Observer Group on Zimbabwean elections, and it was also decided, among other things, that Zimbabwe should be suspended from the Commonwealth Councils for one year and that we would meet in a year to review developments during that one year suspension. In spite of the one year stipulation for meeting, the troika still met in Abuja at your request. Since then, your government has proceeded to impose sanctions on Zimbabwe, a decision which of course is your government's prerogative. However, this unfortunate decision would seem to me to compromise Australia's position as an honest broker in the Zimbabwean crisis.

Meanwhile, I am sad to note that the unhelpful media war between Britain and Zimbabwe has not abated, but actually exacerbated matters thereby worsening the already charged situation. It was against this background that I concluded that another meeting of the Commonwealth Troika on Zimbabwe at this time might not serve any useful purpose.

Indeed, President Thabo Mbeki shares the same view. This position is further reinforced by the fact of certain critical developments that have occurred in Zimbabwe and which must be acknowledged.

In many of our previous meetings, it had been admitted that the issue of land is at the core of the current crisis in Zimbabwe and that an appropriate solution to this problem would go a long way in bringing to early conclusion other associated issues. Following my recent visit to Zimbabwe, I have come to realise that the land issue may no longer be the most serious problem at this juncture as it cannot be compared to the situation during the Lancaster House Conference in 1979 or even in the last ten years. It is now a matter of reality that the Fast Track Land Resettlement Programme, adopted by the Government of Zimbabwe in order to address the situation that was developing in the country at that time, has substantially ended since 31st August 2002.

Since then, the Land Reform Programme (LRP) has continued to be implemented in the normal regulatory process. I note, in particular, that land occupation by demonstrators has ended, while the Government of Zimbabwe has agreed to pay compensation for any improvement on the land acquired under the Fast Track Programme and the LRP.

I am informed that in the current financial year, the Government has actually allocated the sum of four billion Zimbabwe dollars (\$4bn) to pay for full and fair compensation for whatever improvements that may have been made on the land being acquired. Although this may be a

far cry from adequate compensation, the good intention on the part of a Government cash-strapped should not be overlooked. However, the Government still insists that compensation for the true commercial value of the land, at today's prices, must be paid by the British Government, which did not pay anything when the lands were taken from the African owners during the colonial period.

Furthermore, the Government of Zimbabwe has recently been engaged in dialogue with the Commercial Farmers Union (CFU). Indeed, the Government has again reiterated to these farmers its readiness and preparedness to provide land to anyone who wishes to continue farming and has so applied. Certainly, more work needs to be done in this process and it is therefore necessary that every encouragement must be given by all concerned. I emphasise that Government of Zimbabwe should always keep open the channel of dialogue with the Commercial Farmers Union who felt a sense of loss in the exercise.

The results of the Government's effort in the land redistribution exercise have been acclaimed as remarkable. By 1998, 74 000 families had been settled under the willing-seller/willing-buyer basis. An additional 220 000 communal peasant families and 54 000 indigenous commercial farmers were settled under the Fast Track Resettlement Programme on 11 million hectares of land. Ideally, full compensation should have been paid as the land was being appropriated. This programme has no doubt addressed, to some extent, the internal dissatisfaction arising from the skewed colonial land policy which remained a potential source of conflict in Zimbabwe. On the other hand, it is reasonable to expect that a major reform on this vast scale would be attended by some measure of corruption together with complaints of unfairness.

In response to some of these criticisms, President Mugabe confirmed to me that he had in place procedures for receiving complaints, and that all those found guilty of malpractices have been brought to book.

Moreover, in order to promote transparency, equity and ensure sustainable utilisation of resettled land, as well as determining the level of uptake, the Government of Zimbabwe has instituted a land audit that aims to generate confidence in the whole process. This audit will help in the identification of any malpractices or corruption which the Government of Zimbabwe has expressed its readiness to investigate and redress.

With regard to the criticisms on land given to some officials but not utilised, it seems that this may not be directly connected with the Fast Track Programme. Generally, the Zimbabwean Government gave land to those who intended to utilise it for farming purposes. It is also true that many of those allocated land need financial assistance from Government for optimum utilisation. Unfortunately, with priority being given to payment of compensation for improvements on the land, the Government has only been able to provide financial assistance to about 30 percent of this group. This, I believe is an area where the international community can genuinely provide assistance, not to the Government but to those genuinely desirous of farming.

It is encouraging that there has been renewed international interest in supporting the Land Reform Programme in Zimbabwe. Given the progress which I have outlined above, it is essential that we should continue to look at ways by which we can get more members of the international community not only interested but actively involved in the programme, only then can the average Zimbabwean begin to reap the benefits of the exercise and the country would be helped to cope with the issue of scarcity of food.

A major concern and perhaps criticism of the LRP by the international community has been the fate of former farm workers from neighbouring states of Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia particularly affected by the redistribution programme. I am informed that, of the estimated four hundred thousand people affected, some have been resettled, while many others have been re-employed on the 54 000 recently created commercial farms. In fact, I am assured that the Zimbabwean Cabinet has taken a decision to the effect that all foreigners or their offspring from SADC countries who came as labourers before 1980 will be entitled to Zimbabwean citizenship. Accordingly, it is envisaged that by the end of March 2003, the problem of

displaced former foreign workers will no longer be an issue as they will be entitled, as bona fide Zimbabwean citizens, to the full benefits of land reform.

Another area of concern and perhaps outcry pertains to the "Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA)". I am assured in this regard the Government of Zimbabwe continues to make genuine efforts to respond to such concerns. Indeed, following challenges by the media in the Zimbabwean High Court, the Minister of Information has proposed some amendments to the Act. I have been assured that this will be one of the issues to be taken as matter of priority when Parliament resumes later this month.

On the issue of inter-party dialogue, the Government of Zimbabwe remains committed to resuming the talks but feels that this can only happen after the court's ruling on the petition by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). In my separate meetings with Mr Morgan Tsvangirai of the MDC, I have brought to his attention the position of the Zimbabwean Government with regard to negotiations. The MDC will now therefore have to decide on whether to withdraw the case from the court so that the negotiations can resume in earnest or wait until the determination of the case by the court. There is need for Zimbabweans of all parties to dialogue and reach consensus on good governance, human rights, stability and general direction of development of their country.

During my visit to Zimbabwe, Honourable Job Sikhala, an MP of MDC for St Mary's, forwarded a petition to me complaining of breach of fundamental human rights on the part of the Zimbabwean police and possibly sponsored by Government. I raised the issue with President Mugabe who confirmed that the MP concerned had taken the case to court and that the police admitted with apology that the MP was assaulted. The police were to take necessary disciplinary action against the culprit. President Mugabe denied any Government involvement in such police acts. Allowing the case to be prosecuted in court must convince people that Government was not behind the act and would not condone it. From all accounts, it would be appear that violence - political or non-political - is fairly pervasive in Zimbabwe. If there are some coming from Government agencies, there are certainly those coming from non-government agencies. All stakeholders in Zimbabwe have to work together to stop the reign of terror and violence. The Government must be in the vanguard of such efforts.

With the above, it is clear to me that we must concert to give every assistance to Zimbabwe so that the present crisis may be speedily brought to an end. It is also necessary that we should encourage the international community to redeem the pledges of financial assistance, reaffirmed in our Marlborough House decision, in order to expedite the land reform process and bring about the desired improvement in the standard of living of the generality of Zimbabweans. The international community and organisations that have generously contributed to food donation to Zimbabwe must be commended for the humanitarian gesture which has been of tremendous assistance to Zimbabwe and the sub-region. The earlier Zimbabwe can get out of her political crisis, economic difficulties and food shortage, the better it would be for the country, the sub-region and the continent. It is important that we remain positively engaged with Zimbabwe. We must continue to make good offices available for mediation between UK and Zimbabwe, a rather unfortunate confrontation in which rhetorics and media warfare tend to be suppressing reason and fair mindedness.

From all the above, together with what I personally saw on the ground in Zimbabwe, I believe that the time is now auspicious to lift the sanctions on Zimbabwe with regard to her suspension from the Commonwealth Councils. This will represent an appropriate development for the final resolution of the crisis in that country.

I crave your indulgence to forward a copy of this letter to President Thabo Mbeki and another copy to the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth who can use it as a basis for re-establishment of contact with Zimbabwean authorities at all levels. This will be made easier with Prime Minister Tony Blair already accepting an appeal to discourage media offensive against Zimbabwe from the UK side and President Mugabe agreeing to reciprocate in kind. This should be the precursor to re-engagement between UK and Zimbabwe. Copies of this letter will also be forwarded to President Mugabe and Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Please accept, Mr Prime Minister, the assurances of my highest esteem and consideration.

Yours sincerely

Olusegun Obasanjo