



ZIMBABWE: TIME TO ACT

The time has come to act and give real hope to the people of Zimbabwe.

Too many times we have witnessed cruel dictators slapped with only a mild rebuke by the international community. Those few who have spoken out for decency and humanity have too often found their voices met with silence.

But in Australia, where we take our freedoms as a fact of life, it is important to look to where we can give succour to those who seek the freedom we enjoy.

The dictatorship of Robert Mugabe is trembling like a rotten apple. A firm tap, delivered with strength and conviction, could send that apple to the ground. It will result in change in a troubled land. And it will bring real freedom, help and a future to a people who are trapped and starving.

It is time for Mr Rudd to put aside his plans for an Asia Pacific Union and for nuclear disarmament. He must give meaning to the creative, middle power diplomacy he promised and find a way to protect the innocent of Zimbabwe.

Unfortunately the United Nations may not be of much assistance. The Security Council is displaying a lack of resolve. It will be up to the world's leaders to bring about a resolution. And as a leading Commonwealth nation, Australia can play a significant part.

Pressure must be brought to bear on the African Union to denounce the Mugabe regime and to reject the sham election, conducted despite the withdrawal of Morgan Tsvangirai following unrelenting violence and duress. African nations must come to realise that an increasingly unstable Zimbabwe poses a major threat to their own regional security.

However we must also prepare for the most likely scenario. That Mugabe will cling to power no matter what political and economic pressure is brought to bear. The options then narrow.

Australia should therefore begin arguing and preparing for military intervention in Zimbabwe.

This could take the form of a UN Peacekeeping force with a strong African contribution, possibly led by South Africa. It would be best if the African nations provide the bulk of the force. However Australia should be prepared to make a modest contribution, drawing on our recent experience in East Timor.

Only a military presence can stop the Mugabe regime's campaign of violence and intimidation against its citizens.

This will be no easy task, and Mugabe can be expected to strongly resist. But the world cannot stand by much longer as the Zimbabwean tragedy unfolds.

Planning must also begin to assist Zimbabwe to get back on its feet post-Mugabe. Aid agencies must be ready to restore basic services such as clean water and to help kick-start the nation's once vibrant agricultural industries.

The experience in East Timor demonstrates the road to recovery for Zimbabwe will be long and hard. They will need close and ongoing support.

Zimbabwe might be half a world away, but every nation that stands for freedom and humanity must be prepared to stand up when these values are under threat. And it is in Africa's interest that there are not millions of Zimbabwean refugees fleeing and stateless.

The future of Zimbabwe is far from certain. But one thing is for sure. If no one is prepared to take action, its people will continue to suffer. The question for the rest of the world is how long will this tyrant's reign of misery be tolerated.

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