

Zimbabwe deteriorating under Mugabe reign

By Bill Fletcher, Jr.
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The Zimbabwe crisis hit home recently in a very peculiar way. Two South African friends of mine who are overseeing the creation of a Southern African trade union leadership development program traveled to Zimbabwe to meet with the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions. The purpose of the visit was to begin preparations for a week-long trade union leadership training that would bring together labor leaders from across the region.

My friends landed in the Zimbabwean capital, Harare, passed immigration successfully and were waiting for their bags. Suddenly a Zimbabwean immigration official approached them and asked "again" for their purpose in visiting the country. They were then told that since they did not possess a special letter from the Zimbabwean Minister of Labor approving this trip, they must turn around and return to South Africa.

It was only a few weeks ago, interestingly enough, that one of my two friends had visited Zimbabwe for a similar purpose and not once asked about a letter from the Minister of Labor. In fact, he has never been asked for such a letter and is a very well respected African labor educator.

It must be noted that the expulsion of my two friends follows on the heels of the expulsion of a delegation from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) a few weeks ago that was visiting Zimbabwe on a fact-finding mission and to hold discussions with the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade

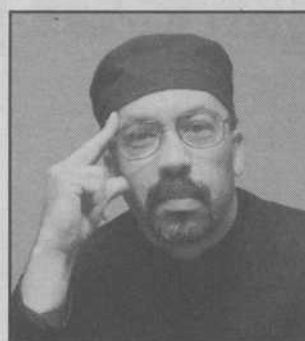
Unions.

As Zimbabwe approaches its March elections, it is important for Black America to take notice. At the risk of stepping on toes, we have to admit that the presidency of Robert Mugabe has devolved from the visionary, courageous leadership of the late 1970s and early 1980s, to a leadership characterized by the selective and demagogic use of revolutionary rhetoric in order to suppress opposition.

Using the ever-present danger of a U.S. and British intervention in Zimbabwe, a worry that is completely reasonable given the antics of both the Bush and Blair administrations, President Mugabe has manipulated the political situation in such a way so as to marginalize, if not eliminate all opposition to his rule.

As a result, Zimbabwe has become increasingly isolated in the region from its historic friends and supporters, while the image of an aging leader clinging to power seems to be the legacy that will be left when President Mugabe eventually leaves the scene.

When I and several other leaders of Black organizations took the step of criticizing President Mugabe in the spring of 2003, there were many African-Americans who called us everything but children of God. How could we criticize a great African leader, we were asked, particularly one who had the proud history of having led the struggle for national libera-



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tion?

Unfortunately, humans must live in the present and not in the past. We must confront situations as they are, rather than how we would like them to be. Facing reality must be based on an understanding of the past in order to move into the future.

The present situation in Zimbabwe is as dangerous as it was preventable. Those who have been defined to be the opposition, including the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (the federation representing most of Zimbabwe's workers), are treated as if they are agents of a foreign power for daring to criticize President Mugabe and his administration. This is quite ironic given the fact that many in the opposition cut their teeth in the war of liberation against White minority rule.

Their criticisms, contrary to what many African-Americans would like to believe, do not center on whether the land seizures that took place in the last several years aimed at White farmers should have taken place. The criticisms focus on who benefited from these seizures (and who did not) as well as the economic and political policies that have been followed by the Mugabe administration, policies, it should be added, that until relatively recently were very much in conformity with what Washington, D.C. and the International Monetary Fund wanted.

The declining living standard and condi-

tions of Zimbabwe's workers and farmers, as a result of the policies of the Mugabe administration, brought forward a complex, if not contradictory, response, parts of which many of us on this side of the Atlantic would not agree. But our agreement is not what is important. What is important is that Zimbabweans settle their own future and they do so in an environment that permits democratic discussion, debate and transition. The administration of President Mugabe is making this less and less possible, a fact which the Bush and Blair administrations are using for their own cynical ends.

When I visited Zimbabwe this past December, I had the opportunity to speak with several Zimbabwean workers who were mystified that African-Americans could place any hope in President Mugabe. I explained the historic importance of Zimbabwe for much of Black America and our overall support for the need for land reform. That is, putting land back into the hands of the African majority.

These Zimbabwean workers nodded their heads both in sadness and understanding. One of them turned toward me and posed these questions: "But what of the reality of our situation, not the image? Does anyone care about what is actually happening on the ground? Is there any thought about the repression we are experiencing? Does anyone care about who is actually getting the land that was seized? Or is it all symbolism?" I had no answer.

Bill Fletcher Jr. is president of TransAfrica Forum.

Let them have their cake, calories, and eat them, too

By Gail C. Christopher
Special to Sentinel-Voice

With all the focus on Medicare prescription drugs coverage and Social Security privatization, many may have missed a critically important health policy development for African-Americans. The federal government issued new dietary guidelines for Americans in January. For the first time since the recommendations were introduced in 1980 (and revisited every five years as required by law), these new guidelines emphasize weight loss as well as healthy eating and cardiovascular health.

While obesity is increasing at alarming rates throughout the United States, African-American and Latino populations, particularly children and youth, are bearing a disproportionately high burden of obesity and related illnesses, such as diabetes and high blood pressure. So this leadership from the government could carry great significance for these communities if the recommendations could be used to change industry practices.

As long as supermarkets continue to disappear from low income communities, as they have since the 1960s and 1970s, and fast food density continues to escalate, these wonderful guidelines — promoting increased vegetables and fruits, low fat protein and moderate sodium vs. potassium consumption — will mean little in Black and Latino neighborhoods.

Sure, obesity and being overweight have many genetic and behavioral causes, but easy access to high fat foods with poor nutritional value may be a key environmental cause of obesity in low income communities, according to Dr. Jason Block of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

In an article in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Block and his colleagues showed that predominantly Black neighborhoods in New Orleans had 2.4 fast food restaurants per square mile, while White neighborhoods had only 1.5. This same pattern is found in Black and low income neighborhoods across the country.

Access to fresh, wholesome foods is further limited by price in inner city and low income neighborhoods. While a few supermarket chains have begun to locate in urban communities, most low income residents must rely on small stores. When local residents

turn to corner stores and convenience markets, in the absence of chain grocery stores or transportation to large stores in other neighborhoods, African-Americans and Latinos face higher prices and few choices.

A U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) study of markets in Eastern Pennsylvania showed that full-service supermarkets offered 19 kinds of fruit, 29 kinds of vegetables, and 18 kinds of meat, while the average small store only carried six kinds of fruit, five kinds of vegetables, and two kinds of meat.

The same study found produce and meats in smaller stores were lower in quality. Other

research has shown that food prices in small stores can be as much as 76 percent higher.

So what's a body — Black or Latino, living in a low income neighborhood — to do with these wonderful new guidelines? Just how are they supposed to... "Consume a variety of nutrient-dense foods and beverages within and among the basic food groups while choosing foods that limit the intake of saturated and trans fats, cholesterol, added sugars, salt, and alcohol?" Doing so would help lower individual risk for diet related diseases like cancer, high blood pressure, (See Christopher, Page 13)

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residents, you can imagine what they would do to out-of-towners.

One definition of masochism is "liking or inviting misery." Black people, in many cases, simply lie down and take the abuse heaped upon us. Yes, we yell and scream, but so does a masochistic person.

Maybe we are like the little boy who constantly hit himself in the head with a hammer. When asked why he did it, he said, "Because it feels so good when I stop."

Our abuse stops from time to time, usually around MLK's birthday, when we hold hands with guilt-ridden White folks and feel, just for a fleeting moment, the pain has stopped. That euphoria soon wears off, the beating starts once again, and we long for it stop again, because it "feels" so good when the pain subsides.

As David Walker must have asked in 1828, "What's wrong with us?"

We continue to give our money to companies that have absolutely no interest in our

welfare. We give our votes to baby-kissin' political candidates who couldn't care less about our children's future, as they cast their votes to use Tasers on 7-year-olds. We turn our children over to teachers who only want to educate them to grow up and work for their children. If that's not a form of masochism, please tell me what it is. Are we once again acquiescing to the paternalistic pretense of those who want to keep us "in our place?" Have we fallen so deep into the pit of dependency that we can only hope for a brief respite from our pain and suffering, and even say "thank you" when they stop abusing us for a while? And, are we sadistically imitating our captors by abusing one another?

I shudder to think how other folks really look upon us, the most educated Black people in the world, with more annual income than many countries. As David Walker must have, I also smile at the thought of Black people taking a real stand against injustice and economic discrimination. What a day that would be! When, once and for all, Black folks say,

"This is as far as we are going; it ends right here, and we will use our financial weapons to wage war against those who mistreat us," our freedom will be complete.

If White folks' attention is what we crave, we would get much more of it by withholding our dollars from them, and by redirecting more of those dollars toward our own businesses.

Until we do that, in a concerted and determined manner, and until we do more to secure our economic future by educating our children and creating jobs for them in our own businesses, the police abuse will continue, the economic discrimination will go on, and Blacks in this country will go down in the annals of history as a broken people who not only took the abuse but, in some cases, invited and welcomed it.

Freedom is another word for "nothing left to lose;" just ask Patrick Henry.

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