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Zimbabwe Uses Food as a Political Tool, Aid Groups Say

By RACHEL L. SWARNS

INSIZA, Zimbabwe, Dec. 8 — The cornfields that once flourished here are just memories now. The surging rivers have become sandy grazing grounds where goats feed on withered grass.

In this village of parched earth and wilting crops, more than half of all families need emergency food aid to survive. It is here, amid the hungry and the vulnerable, that members of Zimbabwe's governing party stand accused of trying to crush their political rivals by denying them food.

The militants seized sacks of cornmeal and peas from a United Nations distribution site and gave them to their supporters, turning away opposition party followers.

And in the days before a local election, the governing party activists reportedly kept bags of food in polling stations, to make their message plain: vote against the party of President Robert Mugabe and you will go hungry.

The United Nations suspended its operations in Insiza in October, protesting "the misuse of its resources for political ends," and the government promised it would not happen again. But the culprits, though known, have not been arrested, and, at a time when drought and land redistribution have left nearly half of Zimbabwe's population at risk of famine, scattered incidents persist.

It is difficult to determine the frequency of such problems, which seem to be much more common in the government-run food program than in international operations run by the United Nations or other humanitarian groups. But the willingness of at least some officials to deny food to the opposition shows how rapidly this country has transformed itself from a promising democracy into an authoritarian state.

Mr. Mugabe, 78, who once won praise for building one of Africa's most prosperous and educated nations, has after 22 years seen his popularity plummet. In a bid to hold on to power, he has condoned the killings and arrests of dozens of opposition supporters over the past three years.

The government insists, however, that the withholding of food for political reasons is not widespread. A senior official recently assured Western diplomats that "lessons had been learnt from the unfortunate incidents" in Insiza.

Despite such assurances, however, opposition supporters in the capital, Harare, and in other towns say officials still demand party cards at some government distribution sites to ensure that only Mr. Mugabe's supporters buy grain.

Here in Insiza, some frightened people say they have already stopped supporting their party publicly, to ensure that they will get food when distribution resumes.

The country's catalog of recent changes under Mr. Mugabe includes curbs on political meetings and threats against judges and journalists who challenge the government.

White farmers have been forced to give their land to blacks as part of a government effort to undo the legacy of British colonialism. But the farm seizures and rights violations have discouraged foreign investment, which has in turn worsened an inflationary economy.

Yet of all Zimbabwe's problems, it is the politicization of food that has raised concerns in Western capitals recently, with strong statements of concern coming from the United Nations, Europe and the United States.

Andrew Langa, the governing party candidate who won the parliamentary election here in Insiza, says he understands why political interference happens during food distributions, although he denies using food to manipulate the voters.

"No one should politicize aid," Mr. Langa said. "I represent everybody, all the citizens of Insiza, and I know they all need food. But I also understand how our people feel."

Speaking of the leading opposition group, the Movement for Democratic Change, and its perceived colonialist ties, he asserted: "People see the M.D.C. as a British-sponsored party. They're against land reform so people regard them as an enemy. So if I have maize and you and one of my party supporters come to me, who do you think I would sell to first?"

Opposition supporters, for their part, feel crippled by such attitudes.

"My supporters don't come to me now, because they know I have nothing," said Mathilda Dube, a local opposition councilor. "They know we are not allowed food because we are M.D.C."

So far, there are no signs of imminent starvation. But malnutrition levels are rising, because many people subsist on one meal a day. The government imports and distributes most of the food supply, selling cheap grain to the public. The United Nations administers free donations from Europe, the United States and other countries.

Western diplomats say that in the distribution of relief aid — as opposed to government-bought food — incidents of political interference have been relatively infrequent.

One of the few documented cases occurred in the impoverished community of Binga, where the government refused to allow the relief agency Save the Children to distribute food for two months after an opposition candidate won a local election. A deal this month broke the deadlock, and food distribution has resumed.

In another needy town, Masvingo, the United Nations reported that last month, government supporters attacked several opposition members and stole their United Nations-provided food. The government supporters were persuaded to return it, and the agency continues its work there.

In Insiza, the United Nations has agreed to resume food distributions after lengthy negotiations in which officials promised that the food would no longer be withheld.

"We have the assurances we need from the government," said Kevin Farrell, who runs the World Food Program office in Zimbabwe. "I don't think this was some grand scheme cooked up in the upper echelons of power in Zimbabwe."

But Mr. Farrell and Western diplomats are less sanguine about the government's distribution program. In some instances, local governing party councilors determine who can buy and who cannot.

During a recent food distribution near the town of Bikita, an anxious man approached an official who was wearing a United Nations T-shirt.

"In my village," said the man, Elijah Chifodya, an unemployed father of five, "they're denying us food because we're opposition."

"I'm not going to give it up," he said of his party affiliation. "but I'm going to pretend I'm no longer supporting them so at least I can get food."