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Mugabe's Recruits Flee Brutal Zimbabwean Past

By GINGER THOMPSON

JOHANNESBURG, April 10 — It's neither the week they spent in jail nor the nights on the streets that most torment the dozen or so young Zimbabweans standing like scared deer in a park at the center of the city. Their nightmares, they said, come from the demons inside.

They look like common vagabonds, dressed in ripped T-shirts and shoes with no laces. But since they abandoned their homeland last December, they said, they have lived like hunted prey: on the run from their government, harassed by the South African police and despised as traitors by Zimbabwean immigrants here.

The young men, who range in age from 18 to 22, explained that they are runaways from Zimbabwe's National Youth Service, whose graduates are known and feared as the "green bombers," a nickname that comes from the group's military-style uniforms and capacity for devastation.

Human rights groups and Western diplomats accuse President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe of turning the recruits into violent thugs and unleashing them on political opponents. President Mugabe, who has governed since the end of white rule in 1980, dismisses the accusations. He has said that he established the youth league three years ago as a kind of poor boys' Peace Corps, enlisting his country's sizable 18-and-under population for desperately needed community service projects.

In an interview today, Makhosi Ngusanya, 19, said he answered President Mugabe's call to service when his teachers filled his head with visions of a noble way out of poverty.

"They told us that if we became good green bombers then they would make us soldiers and give us land," Mr. Ngusanya said. "But they didn't give us anything. And all they taught us was to kill.

"For me it got too bad," he added. "There was too much beating — old people, young people, our own aunts and uncles. I had to run away."

Allegations of escalating abuses by the green bombers — whose numbers are estimated at 10,000 by human rights investigators — have led Western leaders and human rights groups to criticize the Mugabe government. But for President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, political analysts said, the arrival here of a small band of green bomber defectors compounds a complex foreign policy problem.

President Mbeki has so far clung to a policy of quiet diplomacy in Zimbabwe, issuing statements of concern that have the effect of playing down allegations of government abuses.

Meanwhile, mounting evidence of a brutal Zimbabwean reality pervades South African society, turning up pressure on President Mbeki to take a tougher stand.

Human rights groups report a violent crackdown by President Mugabe against the opposition that forced nearly 1,000 people to flee their homes. An opposition representative in the Zimbabwean Parliament arrives in Johannesburg showing reporters how he was tortured by Zimbabwean security agents with electric shock. Three Zimbabwean women who had participated in a rally here against President Mugabe report they were later raped by Zimbabwean agents operating in South Africa. A popular Zimbabwean cricket player flees to South Africa saying he received numerous death threats after wearing a black armband — a symbol of mourning for what he considered the death of democracy in his homeland.

At the University of the Witwatersrand last week, researchers held the premier of a documentary called, "In a Dark Time," about sexual attacks by the green bombers against women and girls linked to government opposition groups. "We need to break the silence of academia and human rights institutions in South Africa about what is happening in our neighborhood," said Dr. Sheila Meintes, a member of South Africa's Commission on Gender Equality.

Now, young men like Henry Nyathi, trained in Zimbabwe's youth service camps, have begun talking publicly in Johannesburg about the cruelties they committed in Mr. Mugabe's name.

In Zimbabwe, where an estimated seven million people go hungry, Mr. Nyathi described how he chased men away from food lines if they were not card-carrying members of the governing political party.

"If the people refused to leave the lines," he said, "we beat them."

John Luscius, 22, said he recalled setting fire to the homes of those who opposed the president. He said he ransacked white-owned farms, beat white farmers and stood by laughing as his superiors raped women.

Buthelezi Moyo, 18, said he and 11 other green bombers beat a 21-year-old woman with a sjambok, a stiff whip. He decided to run away, he said, when he realized that everyone, even his own mother, despised him.

"She did not want to see me anymore," he said.

Jethro Goko, the deputy editor of a leading South African newspaper and a native of Zimbabwe, said reports of such abuses had not been lost on the Mbeki government, the second black government since the end of white rule in 1994. However, he said the issue, like most in South African politics, has become clouded by race.

It starts, he said, with a reluctance to turn against another black government, one that helped free South Africa from white minority rule.

Mr. Goko noted that demands within South Africa for more aggressive pressure — including economic sanctions — had come mostly from sectors that are dominated by whites. Among them, Mr. Goko said, are the same white business leaders and white political parties that urged South Africa's black leaders to refrain from sanctions against the former white regime. Political experts said President Mugabe had successfully portrayed the opponents as tools of Western governments.

Other political experts, including Princeton Lyman, a former United States ambassador to South Africa, suggest that Mr. Mbeki's political influence over President Mugabe is limited. Mr. Mugabe was once one of Zimbabwe's fiercest freedom fighters. President Mbeki, on the other hand, lived in exile during his country's fight against white rule. That difference, Mr. Lyman said, continues to hold great weight in both societies.

Still, he and other political experts pointed out, as the leader of one of Africa's strongest democratic economies, President Mbeki could exert a different, and perhaps more effective, kind of pressure.

Moses Mzila Ndlovu, a high-level official in Zimbabwe's leading opposition party, has charged that South Africa helps prop up the Mugabe government by allowing Zimbabwe to defer payments of millions of dollars in debt for electricity, fuel, telephone service and food.

"President Mugabe is taking that money and using it to build structures of repression," said Mr. Ndlovu, who arrived in Johannesburg on Wednesday and plans to seek temporary asylum because of recent arrests in Zimbabwe of opposition leaders. "The South African government has to come clean on this. They cannot continue to hide their support for a repressive regime behind arguments of African solidarity."