

Mugabe finds succour in Beijing deals

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President Robert Mugabe found a sanctuary from international criticism in Beijing yesterday as the Chinese government gave him an economic deal that is expected to provide Zimbabwe with desperately needed funds.

The cooperation agreement signed with the Chinese president, Hu Jintao, reflects a strengthening alliance between Mr Mugabe, who has adopted a "look east" policy to circumvent western critics, and the government in Beijing, which is strengthening its presence in Africa to secure energy, minerals and other commodities to fuel what is the world's fastest growing economy.

Few details of the deal were released, but China's Xinhua news agency reported that Beijing would provide economic and technical support in several areas, including help to finance construction of a power plant and the sale of a 60-seater plane to Harare.

Mr Mugabe's spokesman has previously said that Zimbabwe would also ask China for the expansion and extension of lines of credit to deal with triple-digit inflation and foreign debts of \$4.5bn (£2.5bn).

At a time when he is treated as a pariah in Europe and the US and by many international organisations, Mr Mugabe is keen to deepen diplomatic and economic relations with China.

Beijing, which is thought to be interested in Zimbabwe's reserves of platinum and other minerals, has been more than willing to offer moral and financial support.

"You have made major contributions to the friendly relations between our two countries," Mr Hu said at the start of the meeting yesterday.

Relations have strengthened steadily since Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980, but the pace has accelerated rapidly in recent years.

Bilateral trade hit \$100m in the first three months of this year and Beijing has started to replace the west as a source of capital to such an extent that Mr Mugabe says China will soon be the country's leading foreign investor.

Some of the biggest deals have seen China supply hydro-electric generators for the national power authority, training jets for the air force, planes for the national airline and thousands of commuter buses.

According to the New York Times, China also won a contract last year to farm 386 square miles of land seized from white farmers in 2000.

The roof of Mr Mugabe's new £7.4m palace is covered with Chinese tiles donated by Beijing; in return, the president has been exhorting his population to study Mandarin and try Chinese food.

China yesterday conferred an honorary professorship on Mr Mugabe from the Foreign Affairs University, under the auspices of the Chinese foreign ministry.

"It is in recognition of the outstanding research and remarkable contribution in the work of diplomacy and international relations by his excellency," An Yongyu, Communist party secretary of the university, was quoted as saying by the China Daily.

"People know very well that the president is a man of strong will and achievements, a man safeguarding world peace."

Mr Mugabe's visit came as the UN yesterday launched a campaign to provide urgent aid to 700,000 Zimbabweans made homeless or jobless by housing demolitions.

Unicef urged the Harare government to immediately halt the destruction of homes. UN officials said that the demolitions were continuing in eastern Zimbabwe despite claims by the government that it had ended the drive.

Unicef also appealed to the government for unhindered access to provide aid to the uprooted families. The Unicef effort follows the damning report on Mr Mugabe's sweeping drive to tear down the homes of the urban poor by the UN's special envoy, Anna Tibaijuka.

James Elder, Unicef spokesman in Harare, said Zimbabwe had "the world's fourth highest rate of HIV infection, the world's fastest rising child mortality rate, drastic economic decline and a growing food emergency. It is just too much. That is why we are working to help."