

**March 28, 2003**

## **Zimbabwe Opposition Reported to Be Targets of Violence**

**By GINGER THOMPSON**

JOHANNESBURG, March 27 — In the days after a crippling strike by opponents of President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, the government there has struck back with a wave of violence and intimidation that has brought condemnation from governments and human rights groups around the world.

Human rights workers and diplomats say that with the world's attention focused on war in Iraq, Mr. Mugabe has unleashed Zimbabwe's armed forces and militia against his own people, even as the country prepares for two important parliamentary elections on Sunday.

Internet reports from Harare describe hospital wards full of people suffering from severe burns and broken fingers and toes. Photographs show men and women with swollen lash marks across their backs and chests. Opposition leaders report that more than 1,000 people have fled their homes and that more than 500 people have been arrested.

The police confirmed that they had arrested hundreds, adding that those detained had incited violence. Some of them, the police said, burned buses and cars. The police officials denied accusations of brutality.

Human rights groups, however, say most of those arrested are leaders and supporters of Zimbabwe's main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change. The prisoners, human rights officials say, are often beaten and detained in their homes.

The deepening tensions followed a two-day strike by the opposition that halted most business and industry in Zimbabwe. The action was considered the largest public protest against Mr. Mugabe, 79, since he was re-elected last year in a contest that was marred by charges of fraud and intimidation.

Political analysts and opposition leaders issued forecasts for more political storms ahead. In a speech last Friday, Mr. Mugabe boasted that he could be a "black Hitler, tenfold."

The State Department has called on the Zimbabwe government to "cease its campaign of violent repression," and to bring to justice the perpetrators of "serious and widespread human rights abuses."

South African leaders, long advocates of what they call "quiet diplomacy" with Zimbabwe, began on Wednesday to turn up the volume, with expressions of concern by President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa to Parliament. A South African diplomat in Harare said President Mbeki had ordered them to "get to the bottom of the accusations and report back."

Amnesty International, in a report on Friday, issued a warning that said: "The alarming escalation in political violence is a clear indication that the Zimbabwe authorities are determined to suppress dissent by any means necessary, regardless of the terrible consequences. We look upon the next 10 days with fear."

On Sunday, voters in two important townships currently controlled by the opposition are supposed to go to the polls to elect new representatives to the Zimbabwean Parliament.

In a news conference today in Harare, opposition leaders showed reporters copies of the government's voter rolls, and said that dozens of people on the lists did not exist. Government officials dismissed those charges.

Monday will mark the deadline set by the opposition for Mr. Mugabe to accept and begin addressing a list of 15 demands, including disbanding government militias, restoring freedom of the press and releasing all political prisoners.

Mr. Mugabe, who has governed Zimbabwe since the end of white-minority rule more than 20 years ago, played down the impact of the strike and dismissed his opponents' demands, saying he would not obey "pathetic puppets" of the West.

He also ordered security forces to crack down on those using violence against the government, accusing the opposition of employing mob aggression under the guise of defending human rights.

The opposition, emboldened by the success of its two-day strike, has promised "mass action," against Mr. Mugabe. Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the Movement for Democratic Change, said the violence by soldiers and militia had deepened the country's "crisis of governance."

"No amount of brutality and arrests will discourage people from engaging in an agenda they have determined whose time has come," said Mr. Tsvangirai, who is currently on trial on charges of treason. "The more the repression the more it will rebound."

In a full-page newspaper advertisement today, his party issued a call to the armed forces, urging them to serve the people, not the president.

"To us in the M.D.C., the uniforms of the army should be a symbol of national pride, evoking a sense of security rather than terror," read the political ad. "The M.D.C. says no to any attempt to pit the heavily armed security forces against defenseless people."

Perhaps the most devastating impact of Zimbabwe's political conflict has been on its economy, marked by an inflation rate now at more than 150 percent, with unemployment at 70 percent, severe shortages of gasoline and more than 60 percent of its population — estimated at 11.6 million — in need of food aid.