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Strike Idles Zimbabwe as Opposition Tries to Oust the President

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HARARE, Zimbabwe, June 3 (AP) — A general strike shut down much of Zimbabwe's battered economy today, but security forces prevented efforts to organize large street protests against President Robert Mugabe.

Most banks, shops and other businesses remained closed across Zimbabwe on the second day of a weeklong show of antigovernment sentiment by an increasingly defiant opposition.

The opposition said it hoped the strike and weeklong protest would be a "final push" to force Mr. Mugabe to step down after 23 years in office.

Security forces reacted swiftly to crush street demonstrations, using rubber clubs, rifle butts, water cannons, tear gas and warning shots with live ammunition to disperse crowds.

Rather than risk confrontation with troops and the police, many Zimbabweans stayed home. The general strike halted commerce in major cities, putting more pressure on a national economy near collapse.

The opposition blames Mr. Mugabe for sinking the country into political and economic ruin. There are shortages of food, medicine, fuel and currency. Annual inflation is at 269 percent. Widespread starvation has been avoided only with international aid.

Economic hardship adds to the growing dissent in a country where ordinary people struggle to survive while the ruling elite live lavishly.

Agriculture, the biggest sector of the economy, has ground to a near standstill since Mr. Mugabe's land reform program was completed last year. The majority of white-owned commercial farmland was seized ostensibly for redistribution to landless blacks. Many of the prime farms, however, have gone to Mugabe confidants, and the farms that have been given over to black farmers have largely been divided into tiny subplots.

Today, downtown Harare, the capital, was as quiet as a Sunday because of the strike, while 90 percent of the businesses in Bulawayo, the second-largest city, closed, said Douglas Mwonozora of the Monitors of the National Constitutional Assembly, an alliance of civic and reform groups.

Provincial towns, which are opposition strongholds, reported that 70 percent of businesses closed for the strike, Mr. Mwonozora said.

Authorities arrested at least 154 people, including opposition activists and at least six lawmakers, across the country on Monday, said a police spokesman, Wayne Bvudzijena.

The opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, was among those arrested, but he was later released.

The government of neighboring South Africa issued a muted response to the violence and protests. "More than ever before, the South African government remains convinced that there is no substitute for dialogue" between the governing party and the opposition, said a statement from the South African Foreign Ministry.

The South African leaders have been reluctant to denounce Mr. Mugabe, who supported their anti-apartheid struggle.

The increasingly unpopular Mr. Mugabe pushed the passage of severe new security laws last year allowing the government to ban public gatherings.

The police fired tear gas today as people gathered in the western Harare township of Warren Park, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change said. No injuries were reported. On Monday, scores of demonstrators were forced to lie on sidewalks or the ground while the police or soldiers beat and kicked them.

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