

Zim: "Sanctions are hurting the right people"

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22 Nov 2010

HARARE: The word "sanctions" was among the first five words mentioned to the new European Union (EU) ambassador to Zimbabwe Aldo Dell Ariccia when he first arrived and met with government officials in Zimbabwe a few months ago.

The country's politicians have tried to convince Zimbabweans and outsiders that the sanctions imposed on 98 individuals and companies are directly linked to the collapse of the country's economy and the general drop in the quality of life.

In 2002 the EU imposed targeted sanctions on President Robert Mugabe, members of his ZANU-PF party, armed forces, the police, judges, individuals and companies with links to the party and its officials. The sanctions were a direct response to the deterioration in the human rights and political climate in the country.

The sanctions include travel bans to EU territory, freezing of assets, an embargo on arms and related materials and a ban on equipment that might be used for internal repression.

Dell Ariccia describes the measures as "restrictions on ZANU-PF officials, their entities and those individuals and entities associated with them.

"The sanctions are not designed to hurt the ordinary people of Zimbabwe but those targeted and those who are close to political power. To demonstrate this fact the EU remains Zimbabwe's second biggest trade partner after South Africa," Dell Ariccia points out.

To buttress his point he told IPS that the EU is funding an US\$18 million project to support the recovery of the country's important sugar sector. The EU also remains actively involved in several humanitarian projects in the country.

But economic historian Dr Tafataona Mahoso differs sharply from the EU envoy. "These sanctions are an economic war on the people of Zimbabwe. Lives of people have been devalued and pushed back to 1953 levels," said Mahoso.

He regards the sanctions as a Trojan horse employed against the people of Zimbabwe.

Mahoso cites the example of millions of Zimbabweans who migrated to neighbouring countries and western capitals where they were forced to take up menial jobs that they would not have accepted back home. This is an effect of the sanctions.

"We have witnessed the loss of pensions and of dignity, which explains why this is a war. It affects everyone in its path," he

says.

In outlining how the country's economy has been affected by the sanctions, Mahoso explains that Zimbabwean companies are not able to source equipment from abroad because they cannot access lines of credit. The country's government is struggling to provide basic services because it is forced to operate a cash economy.

"A sanctioned economy produces a sanctioned people. The economy is like a river and whoever decides to impose sanctions on a country is like putting poison in that river and anyone who depends on that river is affected," believes Mahoso.

But Mahoso's view is not necessarily the dominant one among Zimbabweans.

"There are no sanctions on the economy of Zimbabwe and its people by the EU and other western countries," argues Okay Machisa, the director of Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights) in an interview with IPS.

"We know the real sanctions were imposed on the people of Zimbabwe in 2008 by a certain regime which barred us from enjoying freedom of expression and association with a political party of our choice," he adds. ZimRights is a membership-based organisation that fights for citizens' human rights.

It is widely believed that the presidential election results of 2008 were rigged to prevent an absolute victory for the Movement of Democratic Change's Morgan Tsvangirai.

Biko Mutsaurwa, an artist, also holds a different opinion. He told IPS that the country's economic woes have nothing to do with EU sanctions but are a direct result of poor economic policies.

"The crisis was triggered when the government was persuaded to adopt neo-liberal policies in the 1990s based on the recommendations of the international financial institutions," says Mutsaurwa. The international financial institutions are the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

"The fact that only 98 people and their companies are sanctioned and the effects are felt by the whole country tells of the corruption and plutocracy of the 98 people who control everything," he argues.

But have the sanctions achieved their intended purpose of adding pressure on the political elite to return to democracy?

"There has been an impact on the people who are targeted. If not, they would not have launched this campaign for the removal of the sanctions," says Dell Ariccia.

However, John Chimunhu, a freelance journalist, is of a different opinion: "Nothing much has changed, the repression goes on and the targeted people have transferred their loot to Hong Kong and are continuing looting here at home," Chimunhu told IPS.

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