

Zimbabwe unleashes lethal force on the enemy — its people

The Sunday Times (UK) by Christina Lamb

20 January 2019



Sarah Mupandi, 15, lies in pain on a hospital trolley after being attacked by police Photo: GRAEME WILLIAMS

Children and the elderly are among those dragged from their homes and viciously beaten by police and soldiers following fuel price protests

The 15-year-old schoolgirl lies corpse-like on the metal hospital trolley, legs weirdly twisted, skin waxy from the intense heat, the only movement her eyelids fluttering in pain. When her eyes do open, they look out with utter terror, quickly closing again as her two aunts negotiate with nurses how to pay the \$200 for the X-rays she needs — the equivalent to a monthly wage.

Her name is Sarah Mupandi, she dreams of being a lawyer and she is the face of a people so despised by their government that over the past week it has set police, soldiers and dogs on everyone from children to the elderly, then expects them to pay for their hospital treatment.

Around midnight on Monday, when Sarah was sleeping, seven masked police officers smashed the door of her home in Epworth, a poor township in the east of Harare, dragged her and her 18-year-old brother from their beds and began savagely beating them with sticks and sjamboks, or whips.

“I was screaming,” she says weakly. “They shouted, ‘Why are you screaming?’ and beat me more.”

“They beat me here, here, here,” she adds, pointing at her left arm, her chest, her legs and buttocks.

The officers took her to Harare Central police station with dozens of other local people, almost all men, then to Chikurubi, a maximum-security prison notorious for disease and torture.

Only on Thursday afternoon was she released to the aunts she has lived with since her parents moved to South Africa to try to earn money to pay for her schooling, and ordered to appear in court on Friday.

It was there that she collapsed and ended up in Parirenyatwa hospital. One nurse there says quietly: “We’ve seen dozens of cases — the morgue is full.”

Sarah is one of hundreds of people who have been dragged from their homes over the past few days across Zimbabwe and beaten in a brutal crackdown that seems designed to terrify a population into submission and quell protests at the almost tripling of fuel prices last Sunday.

The price hike to \$3.31 a litre, making Zimbabwe the most expensive place in the world to fill up a car, was the last straw in a country with 90% unemployment where people rely on “kombi” minibuses to get from the townships to the city to sell their few tomatoes or potatoes.

When trade union leaders, as well as a well-known preacher, Pastor Evan Mawarire, called for a nationwide stay-away on Monday, almost all shops and businesses closed and there were clashes in the streets.

The response was swift. The regime reacted with brutality, shocking even to those worn down by decades of Robert Mugabe’s dictatorship.

Police and soldiers went house to house dragging people out and beating them, while plain-clothes men with AK-47s shot others.

On Tuesday morning the state shut down the internet in a clear attempt to stop information getting out as President Emmerson Mnangagwa visited Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan trying to get money for his bankrupt country — as well as signing an agreement for military training from Moscow.

Tomorrow he heads for Davos where he will hobnob with world leaders in the Swiss resort, enjoying lobster and champagne and plugging his slogan “Zimbabwe is open for business”, which is on billboards all over Harare.

While he has been away, the world has been largely blind to what his security forces have been doing. With the internet shut down for all but a few hours of the past few days, only a few anguished appeals for help and fragmented reports have emerged.

Now the truth about the vicious crackdown can be revealed.

The Sunday Times has secretly met dozens of victims in safehouses and clinics across Harare, the country’s capital, ranging from a 10-year-old boy to an 80-year-old man. We have seen numerous scars from beatings, burns and even dog bites as police set bulldogs on their own people.

Information is scarce. The government says 300 people have been arrested and three killed, but by Friday the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO forum had catalogued 12 dead, 78 with gunshot wounds and 242 with dog bites, as well as hundreds of victims of beatings.

One western diplomat had heard of “as many as 200 dead, certainly 50”. Many of the gunshot victims are rumoured to have been taken into the headquarters of the ruling Zanu-PF party.

We the People, a nationwide network of monitors that runs a freephone number, reports that one Harare clinic saw 63 injured people over a 24-hour period from Thursday to Friday and referred a further 30 more critical cases to hospital. Yesterday more reports were coming in of beatings overnight.

Four heads of non-governmental organisations have gone into hiding, including Rashid Mahiya, head of the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, an umbrella group. His mother and brother were both picked up and beaten by soldiers searching for him.

More than 700 people are believed to have been detained. “Over the last few days we’ve been totally overrun,” said Doug Coltart, a young lawyer representing some teachers who were picked up and beaten. “There have been so many arrests and abductions that we don’t have enough people to respond.”

“Even under Mugabe we never saw anything like this,” said his father, David Coltart, a senator and long-time opposition activist.

“We are even wishing Mugabe hadn’t gone,” says Farai, a driver in Harare, who regularly has to queue 20 hours for petrol. “We are poorer than ever. Mnangagwa has done worse things in 14 months in power than Mugabe in 37 years. He never shot people or switched off the internet.”

The euphoria of November 2017, when people came out into the streets following Mugabe’s arrest by the military, now seems sadly mistaken.

At the time General Constantino Chiwenga, the military chief, was lauded as a hero and made vice-president.

Many now blame Chiwenga for the current brutal repression and believe they were used by the military in 2017 to legitimise what was in fact a coup.

Chiwenga has been in charge while Mnangagwa is travelling and there is reputedly little love lost between the two men, prompting some to see what is happening now as a second coup.

“What’s different from Mugabe’s time is the militarisation and randomness,” said one of those monitoring the attacks. “Most of the victims are not activists or opposition supporters, just poor people minding their own business and trying to survive.”

Among them was Precious, a widow of 45, who looks after eight children — four of her own and four of her sister who died. She often lives on blackjack, edible weeds, in order to survive.

On Monday afternoon during the stay-away, she was at home in Dzivarasekwa, southwest of Harare, with all her children and locked the door fearing trouble.

“Around 3pm we heard a noise and saw eight men — four police and four soldiers,” she said. “They kicked the gate and door and yelled, ‘All out!’.”

The terrified family came outside where police ordered the children to roll in the mud and started to beat two of the boys and a girl. The youngest was her nephew, Ezekiel, aged just 10.

“They were all crying,” said Precious, whose name has been changed to protect her. “I was crying but I couldn’t do anything. The police told my children, ‘You are the youth and we are going to stop you.’”

Ezekiel was left covered in slashes and open wounds, which Precious had to wash and patch up since no one could go out to a clinic. “He already lost his parents,” she said. “Now this — he is having nightmares and cannot sleep.”

After beating the 10-year-old, the police went door to door. Precious said when her neighbours refused to open the door, the police broke the window and tear-gassed the house to force them out.

Civil society activists and volunteers have a set up network of safehouses to deal with the victims as they did in the Mugabe days. In one clinic yesterday, among 15 people waiting for treatment I met Samuel Takawira, walking on wooden crutches with a badly swollen foot with clear tooth marks.

He explained that he was walking back from Harare, where he had been doing some carpentry, to his home in Hopley when soldiers and police stopped him and two others. “They ordered us to lie down then began beating us with sticks and sjamboks,” he said. “Then they released two bulldogs on us and laughed as they bit us.”

Nor is the violence just in Harare. In one safehouse I met Alex and Shadrek from the rural town of Karoi, who told me they were dragged from their homes to the road and beaten.

Alex showed the burns on his hand where they forced him to put it in the fire of a burning tyre then roll in the road. “I kept telling them I wasn’t involved but they kept beating us.”

The two men managed to flee into the bush where they hid for two days before making their way to Harare, but they say 26 others are still detained.

“The police keep coming to my house to look for me so I can’t go back,” said Shadrek. “My wife and children are terrified.”

At the magistrates’ courts in Rotten Row, Harare, on Friday afternoon I met dozens of families whose husbands or sons had been picked up. In courtroom after courtroom, one group after another were being denied bail.

In court 9, Fadzizai Chibanda and her friend Caroline were waiting for news of their husbands, Patrick and Victor, who had been dragged from their homes in Epworth at midnight on Monday.

“Around 50 masked men with guns came and broke down doors,” said Caroline. “It was terrifying.”

Fadzizai said: “We don’t know where [our husbands] are to send them food and don’t have money for lawyers or to come to courts.”

At about 3pm, after hours of waiting, 61 prisoners shuffled into court 9, several of them with clear signs of beating. Bail was denied and the prisoners were told their cases would go straight to trial for inciting violence.

A similar scene was under way in court 11, where six prisoners were brought in. They were being represented by Rusty Markham, MP for Harare North from the opposition Movement for Democratic Change.

“What is happening is completely unconstitutional,” he said. “The fact every single court is doing the same shows it is political and state sponsored.”

Elsewhere another lawyer was desperately trying to find out what had happened to a policeman who had disappeared after apparently refusing to be part of the beatings. With the internet shut off for the second time, accessing information was difficult.

Downstairs in court 6, Pastor Mawarire was appearing, accused of inciting violence and trying to topple the government. “He told people to stay away, not be violent,” said his brother Alan Mawarire. “He is being made a scapegoat.”

“What’s happening is inhumane, unconstitutional and breaks my heart,” said Shorai Chidena, a lawyer. “They are shutting off everything so the outside world doesn’t find out.”

Outside in the car park a colony of rats ran around the food van where the few people with money were buying greasy sandwiches and talking about what might happen next.

Just along the road was the town centre where six people were shot dead protesting against election results last August that gave a landslide majority to Zanu-PF, which has governed the country since independence and left them in this situation.

Just as then, the regime has blamed last week’s violence on the opposition. “The timing of the protests, targeting of police stations, inflating of the number of victims among other shenanigans . . . all point to a poorly concealed political agenda oiled by the country’s traditional foe,” declared The Herald, the state-owned newspaper, yesterday.

No one knows what will happen next. Though shops reopened on Friday and coffee shops were still busy in the affluent northern suburbs, in the centre yesterday the streets were quiet and the atmosphere was menacing. Soldiers in trucks watched the townships.

With talk of another stay-away tomorrow, supermarkets had large queues. Word had spread that there was fuel in a petrol station in Belvedere and motorists had been gathering since the early hours. I counted more than 250 cars in the line.

Back at the hospital, Sarah and her aunts were wondering how they would get home and how safe they would be. “We are very scared,” Sarah said. “At school we learn governments and police are supposed to protect their people. But these ones are wicked.”

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/zimbabwe-unleashes-lethal-force-on-the-enemy-its-people-zw87sxc96>

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