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BRITISH PARLIAMENT

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Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Labour)

I beg to move,
That this House has considered the situation in Zimbabwe.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. May I say how pleased I was to secure the debate at this particular time? I welcome the fact that the present Minister for Africa, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin); the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes); and a former Minister for Africa, the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) are here.

Most people will remember the euphoria—we saw it—in Zimbabwe just over a year ago, in 2017, when the long-serving President Mugabe was ousted in what can only be called a form of military coup. There was such hope then that after the years of oppression, unemployment and fear, real change was coming. At the time, some of us did point out that Mnangagwa had been very much part of the Mugabe regime and, indeed, had played quite a sinister role in the horrendous slaughter of thousands of people in Matabeleland back in the period from 1983 to 1987. Of course, he was joined by Chiwenga as vice-president. He had been the head of the combined defence forces and also played a very important role in the terrible situation in Matabeleland. But all of us who love Zimbabwe and know the potential of that beautiful country still hoped that change was going to happen.

The elections held last summer [30 July 2018] were another crucial milestone. It is worth remembering that elections in Zimbabwe since 2002 had been both violent and rigged. In 2008, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission took more than five weeks to declare the result, and more than 270 activists, almost all belonging to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, were killed. The polls in 2013 were relatively peaceful, but regarded internationally as rigged. The electoral voting rolls were grossly manipulated in favour of voters in rural areas, where ZANU-PF had the greatest support.

Shortly before last year's elections, the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns) and I visited Zimbabwe to get a feeling for what was happening there before the elections and to report back to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association on the possibilities of a free and fair election and how, if there were free and fair elections, we in this Parliament might engage with Zimbabwe's Parliament. We met a whole range of people, from Government, political parties, business and civil society.

We reported back on the very different atmosphere—certainly compared with what I had seen on my many visits during the worst of the troubles in Zimbabwe—the open presence of troops, police having disappeared from the streets, and the roadblocks where police used to demand money having disappeared. We did query a number of issues that were seen during the electoral process and particularly the fact that the new constitution that had been signed up to was not being adhered to. Access to the media was not being honoured. There were still problems with the electoral rolls.

And we felt that the electoral commission was not showing a strong enough and openly transparent view that it was determined to have free elections. We warned in our report that although there

would not be the violence around the election that there had been in the past, there was a real danger of its being another stolen election, and that the bar for a free and fair election was actually set very low.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)

I commend the hon. Lady not just for securing this debate, but for her courage and tenacity in pursuing the issues that she has. Does she agree that because there is no violence in situations such as the one that she describes, there is very often an assumption in the international consciousness that elections have been free and fair when in fact, on many occasions, including the one that she is outlining, they are anything but?

Kate Hoey

Yes; the hon. Gentleman is right. The absence of violence specifically at the polling stations and so on was remarkable—there was not any—but that does not mean that the election was free and fair. Very often elections are rigged before election day, and then there is what happens afterwards. Of course, it was what happened after the election that night, literally, that made people feel that it was not free and fair.

Mnangagwa was declared the winner by the electoral commission, which was severely criticised for its way of dealing with the count and the delay, again, in making the announcement of the presidential result. We had in the country two Members of the House of Lords, Baroness Jay and Lord Hayward, who I am very pleased is here observing today's debate. They went to the elections formally, to represent the Commonwealth—as part of the Commonwealth delegation—because of course Zimbabwe has applied to be a member of the Commonwealth again. It was very important that the Commonwealth was there. In fact, both Lord Hayward and Baroness Jay saw some of the trouble that happened immediately afterwards. Baroness Jay was in the hotel when the soldiers came in to stop an MDC press conference. Later, some totally innocent Zimbabweans were gunned down in the street by the army—some people were shot in the back. The international community, on the whole—I think that this applies to all the observers—made the point that the election was slightly freer and fairer, but there was not an overwhelming feeling that it was a wonderful Zimbabwean election and democracy was really back at its best.

Of course, since the election, the economy has got even worse. Mnangagwa made a great issue of the fact that Zimbabwe was open for business—the world could come and invest again; there was going to be this absolute change. That did not actually happen. There are huge shortages of food and other important goods. More recently, on 12 January this year, Mnangagwa announced a huge—200%—increase in the price of fuel. That was in a country in which very few people could afford the fuel price as it was, and it led to Zimbabwe, of all countries in the world, having the highest fuel prices. It was just not tenable, and people reacted. The trade unions, which have shown great courage throughout all of this, called for a countrywide “stay away” in protest, and there were demonstrations. There is no doubt that some of the younger people, unemployed people, were very angry, and probably some looting did go on in parts of Bulawayo and Harare, but what the army and the Government did was to respond immediately with huge, excessive force, which left 12 people dead and up to 100 with gunshot wounds, and hundreds of people were lifted in the middle of the night, imprisoned and denied bail.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have seen pretty horrific images showing what has been happening to people on the ground: not just MDC activists, although that is bad enough—it is shocking that many of them have been lifted in the middle of the night, taken away and still are not getting legal representation or any support—but “ordinary” Zimbabweans who were seen to be in areas where there was support for the opposition.

What was also done—it was a very clever move, because all of us know just how much social media has changed the nature of reporting in Africa—was that the internet was closed down, shut down, and was out of action for some three days. That made a huge difference because, as is shown in all the letters that have come out and the reports that we have seen, people felt absolutely isolated in their homes. They were in the dark; there was no electricity. Roads were closed, transport had stopped, schools were closed—everything was closed—and there was no social media, no way to contact people. That was, I believe, a deliberate strategy to cut down the information getting out of the country, and of course that leads to more worry, more concern, and a feeling that everybody has abandoned them. We saw the numbers involved.

Sky News had a very good film, which again showed the army acting, in uniform and with absolute impunity, against innocent passers-by.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con)

I have already asked the hon. Lady to forgive me for having to leave before the end of this important debate. She has consistently done wonderful work with her group. I thank the Minister of State, who, when I returned from Zimbabwe, calmed some of my enthusiasm regarding Mr Mnangagwa and the situation there, about which she and the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) have proved to be dramatically right.

Does the hon. Lady agree with me that this pattern of behaviour during this period was clearly planned beforehand, and that it looks very much like the President left the country in order to come back and criticise it when he got home, and that this is part of a pattern that is totally unacceptable? Does she also agree that we must make the strongest possible representations to the Zimbabwean Government on behalf of the British Government?

Kate Hoey

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his years of support and work. I know how much he cares for Zimbabwe. He is absolutely right. There was this idea that Mnangagwa left the country as soon as the fuel price rose, to go to Russia and begin a tour of different countries—not countries that we would necessarily see as our best friends—to try to bring in some investment. I think that was absolutely deliberate, because he could then say that he had nothing to do with what was happening. Chiwenga, who is seen as the person who wants to eventually take over, was very much in charge.

The systematic abuse and actual torture of individuals continues as we speak. The women who have been raped by soldiers have nowhere to report these crimes, because the rule of law in Zimbabwe has broken down. The Law Society of Zimbabwe has issued a statement raising its concerns about how all the legal cases of the people who were arrested have been conducted. It is a shocking indictment of what used to be a really good legal system. Zimbabwe was way ahead of most of the rest of Africa, in terms of rights and its attitude to the law.

People have said how they felt in the middle of this. People were too afraid to move around, because of the burning of vehicles. They knew that many of the soldiers were doing this, but not in uniform. The Zimbabwean Government had the audacity to think that people would believe their story that these people had gone to army barracks or police stations, stolen the uniforms and then taken part in this activity. Of course, that was complete nonsense. I could go on for a long time about all the terrible things that have happened, but there is no doubt that Mnangagwa knew what was going on. Whatever he has said about what he will do, nothing has happened—none of the responsible people have been prosecuted.

For me, one of the most dangerous things is how the constitution is being completely ignored and the level to which the rule of law has been trampled on by the Executive, the army, the police, the National Prosecuting Authority and some elements of the judiciary. One eminent politician, Innocent Gonese, who is the secretary for justice and legal affairs in the opposition party, said in a letter:

“I never thought I would ever live long enough to witness levels of such depravity, cruelty, callousness and downright disdain and contempt of the right of the citizens as enshrined in our Constitution and our statutes. While our country has had a history of serious violations of human rights starting from the years of colonial rule and repression and the epochs of Gukurahundi, [Operation] Murambatsvina and the dark days of June 2008, the people thought that we had turned a corner in November 2017 with the demise of the former strongman Robert Mugabe.

Sadly it has turned out to be a false dawn. The actors may have changed with the removal of Robert Mugabe and some of his henchmen, but the script has remained the same if not worse.”

I find that pretty horrific, because we saw such dreadful things and now it seems that it is all happening again.

What can we do? First, we cannot ignore what is happening. I am pleased that the Minister called in the Zimbabwean ambassador. I am sure she will tell us more about that. We have to use our position where we can to influence and work with the South African Government and the Botswana Government. I know there is an Africa conference coming up in the next week or two; I do not know whether the Minister is going. We have to be clear that we are calling for the end of the deployment of the military. They have to go back into their barracks. We have to get the United Nations to say that and to make a strong statement on the rule of law.

We need a complete, absolute condemnation of the way that citizens’ internet access was closed down. We need to call for an independent investigation of the human rights violations, to be led by the African Union or the United Nations. We have to find out who gave the orders. It was the same with the people who were killed just after the election—we never really go to the bottom of who had given the orders. The investigation ended up being a whitewash. We need to investigate that, because the commission of inquiry in the post-2018 elections did not get to the bottom of it.

We have to be very clear—the United Kingdom Government have to be very clear—that the international community should completely suspend any initiatives related to re-engaging with the Zimbabwean Government. It is unacceptable, in my view, even to be talking about debt restructuring and private sector investment while so many Zimbabwean civilians are being assaulted and killed.

Ultimately, the sanctions we have now are very low. I am not suggesting that we go back to sanctions, because after the feeling that there was some hope for change, sanctions gave the Zimbabwean Government the opportunity to say, “The world doesn’t like us. It is only these sanctions that are causing all the difficulties.” Of course, there are no sanctions now, so they cannot say that. However, we may have to look at reviewing sanctions, particularly regarding travel.

Mnangagwa got—I am not into aircraft—one of the top planes that can be hired, to go off on his trip. It cost thousands and thousands of dollars, while there are no medicines in the hospitals. Mnangagwa did not actually go to Davos. He left, because I think he knew that if he had gone to Davos, he would have received huge criticism, even there.

We are seeing crimes against humanity. Senator David Coltart, who many hon. Members will know, has made it very clear that crimes against humanity are still being committed. We have to engage very strongly with South Africa and Botswana, as I said. We have to ask the South African Government to really engage. We have not seen the criticism that could have come from South Africa.

Does the hon. Lady agree that, very unfortunately, this is a part of the South Africans' failure to take seriously what is happening in Zimbabwe, and their failure on earlier occasions to criticise? They claim it is a reluctance to do so. It is a long-standing reluctance, which has been in place for many years. If they wish to be considered as a leading player in Africa on the diplomatic front, they need to exercise their will and their considerable power.

Kate Hoey

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The South African Government need to realise—I cannot believe they do not—just how important they could be in this. They could be a real beacon, acting in the interests of the people of Zimbabwe, rather than standing back and saying virtually nothing.

I want to pay tribute to the opposition in Zimbabwe. I have known Nelson Chamisa for a long time. When I first went undercover, he was one of the people who helped to show us around in very difficult circumstances. He is incredibly brave and very charismatic. He did an enormously powerful job in getting people involved in huge rallies, including young people and people who had never been politically involved before. Despite some people, perhaps even in his own party, he has continued to talk clearly about a peaceful future and a peaceful role. Despite his being accused of all sorts of things by the Government, we should give him huge credit for his role.

I have a couple of questions to ask the Minister. Although it is clear that Zimbabwe's application for readmission to the Commonwealth has been seriously set back, there are aspects of the Commonwealth process and engagement, particularly with the people of Zimbabwe, that deserve support. We need to remind people that it is not the United Kingdom that decides whether Zimbabwe will go back into the Commonwealth, but the Commonwealth. Perhaps we have a bit more influence, but we certainly do not make that decision on our own. Are Her Majesty's Government ensuring that the excellent work of the Commonwealth Local Government Forum on strengthening democracy at a local level is well funded and supported by the UK and other Commonwealth countries? Local democracy is an important building block at the grassroots level. Is the Minister still engaged in helping to support charities such as ZANE, which has done so much to help older people who have been left destitute? The pension issue has still not been sorted. One or two hon. Members have made that a big issue. I await the Minister's view on that.

There has been a worrying trend recently, which may stop again now, of some of the Zimbabwean diaspora being sent back as part of the euphoria about the supposedly new regime. The Zimbabwe Vigil, which carries out a vigil on Saturday afternoons outside the Zimbabwean embassy and has maintained its solidarity and support for people in Zimbabwe, is worried that the Home Office is perhaps being too quick off the mark to send people back there where they could be taken into custody.

Will the Minister confirm that the Her Majesty's Government, and particularly the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, have learnt a lesson from what I would call the ill-advised cosy-ing-up to the Zimbabwean leadership, which owed its position, power and loyalty to the military and political machine that manoeuvred to install it and not to the people of Zimbabwe through a free and fair

electoral process? I will not go into more detail; the Minister knows what I am talking about. There is no doubt that our embassy in Zimbabwe had become too identified, rightly or wrongly—I think wrongly—with ZANU-PF. A new ambassador, Melanie Robinson, has just started in Zimbabwe and there are good reports about how she is settling in. On behalf of all hon. Members present and the all-party group, I wish her the very best in that difficult job.

I want to make sure that the Minister realises that those of us who urged caution, particularly Zimbabweans who have long had to cope with the machinations of ZANU-PF brutality and the manipulation of international opinion, were rebuffed by some officials in our embassy who thought that they knew better. I hope that we have learnt that lesson. I pay tribute to all the people in Zimbabwe who have continued to work for democracy, and all the members of the all-party group and everyone in this House who will not let Zimbabwe be forgotten.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con)

I draw hon. Members attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I praise the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) for securing the debate and for the tireless work she does through the all-party group, which is one of the most exceptional groups in the House, among many candidates. She spoke of how members of the Zimbabwean opposition have been fearless, but she has been pretty fearless over the years in going to Zimbabwe. As she noted, her most recent trip was funded by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which I chair. I encourage other hon.

Members with specific interests in countries to come to us if they want funding for that type of trip. In private, I have occasionally accused the hon. Member for Vauxhall of being a bit pessimistic. I was always more optimistic about Zimbabwe as Minister for Africa and, subsequently, through the Commonwealth. Sadly, again, she has been proven right and a realist about the situation—the reality held up. That is a lesson not just for our ambassadors but for many others who go into Zimbabwe but perhaps do not have the decades of experience that the hon. Member for Vauxhall has.

Although I do not have the same experience, I have a long-standing interest in Zimbabwe. When I worked for Barclays in Africa, when things were doing well, all the pan-African IT for Barclays was run out of Harare—as, in fact, were all the IT systems for the whole Caribbean. That seems somewhat ridiculous, given the current situation.

Like many, I want Zimbabwe to return to being a prosperous nation state with proper elections, and I want it back as part of the Commonwealth family. Prior to the elections, however, I was premature in calling for it to be brought back into the family in a less conditional environment. I am still a bit more optimistic than the hon. Member for Vauxhall about keeping up engagement—what was called incremental engagement—which revolved around trying to move forward a little when there were some changes on the other side.

The news coming out of Zim is not only disturbing but wholly unacceptable. In the wake of peaceful civilian protests, the security forces launched brutal crackdowns across Harare and the country. Excess force and brutality, arrests and detentions are being used by the police and soldiers—and they are arbitrary arrests, because there is no law enforcement. That needs to stop.

In Rochford and Southend East, there are 889 people of Zimbabwean heritage, which is about 1% of my constituents. I have heard directly from them horrific tales and allegations about the systemic use of violence and torture by the armed and uniformed members of the Zimbabwe National Army and the Zimbabwe Republic Police, particularly in high-density areas outside Harare and in the suburbs.

One story recounted to me relates to a young man who lives in Budiro, a high-density suburb in the south-west of Harare. He was rounded up with his neighbours and brutally set upon by police. His only crime appeared to be that he lived in the wrong street. Groups of young men had been setting up roadblocks on neighbouring streets and stopping and throwing stones at a few of the cars that remained despite the high petrol prices. The police were sent in and, instead of investigating the complaints, went round to all the homes near the roadblocks and dragged out and beat all the young men who were there, regardless of whether they were involved or not—collective punishment of the community for what had been done by a few. Some of those men are being held without charges or representation, and with no food or water. We cannot condone or accept that behaviour.

John Howell (Henley) (Con)

That story is horrific, but the problem lies subsequent to that, as they have no legal remedy because the judiciary is not independent. A number of lawyers have been protesting in the streets in the last few months. What should we be doing to support those lawyers who are trying to get an independent judiciary?

James Duddridge

There is lots that we can do. The hon. Member for Vauxhall talked about the problems of the legal service. It is worse—the Government are directing the courts as to what to do. There is a series of long-term actions, such as working through the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and other Commonwealth countries, but at the moment, the Government in Zimbabwe are simply not listening.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) describes the situation as terrible, but unfortunately, I have not got to some of the worst bits, which gives me no pleasure to say. There have been several reports about the use of sexual violence, in particular. On 23 January, ITV reported rape claims against soldiers during the unrest. It is my understanding that ITV has met 11 women, all of whom said they were sexually assaulted—that is to say, raped—and that their attackers were members of the Zimbabwean army. This appears to have been systemic and organised use of sexual violence, which should concern us even more than isolated cases of sexual violence.

The reports of death tolls have been varied and, I suspect, understated. Amnesty said that eight people were killed when police and military fired on crowds, while the Zimbabwean Government said only three people were killed, including a policeman who was stoned to death by an angry crowd. The Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights has said that doctors had treated 68 cases of gunshot wounds and more than 100 other cases of “assaults with sharp objects, baton sticks”, and they had seen people left with marks on their bodies after being kicked or stamped on with boots.

Notwithstanding the statement by my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa on Zimbabwe on 17 January and the representations that were made by the Secretary of State on 22 January, we need to ramp up our representations to our Zimbabwean counterparts. We need to remind them of their international obligations on human rights and freedom of opinion and expression, and about the results of the use of excessive force, as evidenced by the injuries that were documented in medical records; those are not just vague accusations.

President Emmerson Mnangagwa cut short his foreign trip, which had been largely aimed at raising foreign exchange and returning investment. He returned to Zimbabwe to stabilise the situation. Well, I have not seen any stabilisation of the situation. I listened very carefully to my right hon.

Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) and the hon. Member for Vauxhall, who felt that the situation had been pre-prepared: petrol prices were put up; then, the President removed himself from the country; and there was a purge. I suspect that they are probably right. Earlier, I had wondered whether there might be something else going on, namely that the military were taking greater control, as they did when there was the earlier coup that led to Mugabe being ousted. I wondered who really is in control of the country; is it the President or is it his Vice-President, the former army general, Constantino Chiwenga? Chiwenga was the muscle behind the November 2017 push that forced Mugabe to resign and I just wonder what is going on behind the scenes. The President is clearly responsible, whether or not he directed or planned the violence; he is the President of the country.

I support the points made by a number of people about getting South Africa involved and I urge that we try to get South Africa involved at both a Government level and an African National Congress level; the ANC contacts with ZANU-PF are even more credible than the normal channels. More broadly, there is a role for the Southern African Development Community, although Botswana, Zimbabwe's neighbour, is particularly influential.

I am not a great fan of sending great missives from the UN, which feels very distant from African countries when they have problems. However, if the UN can do something in co-ordination with the African Union, led by Zimbabwe's near-neighbours, such as South Africa and Botswana, through SADC, that would probably complete the loop and it would give the authority and voice of the UN to Zimbabwe's local peers when they criticise the country.

I fear that the perpetrators and masterminds behind the systematic violence will be emboldened, not by our indifference or by what we say, but by what we do. We are very limited in what we can do, but we must try to do more. I also fear that there will be an increased open militarisation of the country, with further disregard for civil law and further unrest. In all conscience, we cannot allow that to happen.

Before the elections, I had hoped to welcome Zimbabwe back to the Commonwealth; I had hoped that more investment would come in; and I welcomed the CDC investment in Zimbabwe. I still think that that is the right route for the country to take ultimately. However, it seems less and less credible for us to support investment in Zimbabwe while the atrocities take place, although I am mindful that if British money does not come in, then Israeli, Russian or Chinese money, which would be less conditional money, will come in. I do not worry about that happening from the perspective of investment returns or British national interest; I worry about it because doing business in countries such as Zimbabwe allows us to leverage our influence within them. So, there is a fine balance to be struck.

I hope that I am proved right in my long-term optimism and I hope that the hon. Member for Vauxhall is wrong in her sometimes pessimistic attitude. However, I fear that yet again she is right. She is being a friend of Zimbabwe, but also a realist, and I thank her again for making an enormous contribution and for securing this debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mrs Main.

First of all, I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) on bringing this issue forward for consideration. I will place it on the record that she is undoubtedly a true democrat—the honour that she has shown this country by honouring the referendum vote is something that I

sincerely wish was emulated by others in her party. She has done that very well, I congratulate her on it and we look forward to working with her on many other issues as we move forward. Over the years, I have had a particular interest in Zimbabwe—or Rhodesia, as it was formerly—because I have a number of Zimbabweans who have come to live in my constituency who have lost their farms, their property and in some cases everything they had bar the clothes on their back. They fled the lovely country of Zimbabwe.

When I was a young man starting off on life's road, the Prime Minister of Rhodesia was Ian Smith; those of us who are of a certain vintage will recall him. I always remember his saying, because I have used those words myself many times, when he made a unilateral declaration of independence and separated himself from the United Kingdom and from the Commonwealth: "This is not the end. It's not even the beginning of the end. It is perhaps the end of the beginning."

If only Zimbabwe was at the beginning of a process. We had hoped that, with the election of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, there would be a normalisation of the economy and a repairing of relations with multilateral institutions. We had hoped that his election would bring a new beginning, but unfortunately it has not. Indeed, the most recent clashes in Zimbabwe earlier this month were prompted in part by a sharp hike in fuel prices, which has made petrol and diesel in the country the most expensive in the world. So we can understand why people are up in arms.

Inflation in Zimbabwe is very high. Probably the only country that beats Zimbabwe for inflation is Venezuela, where inflation is running at 1 million % and is predicted to be 10 million % by the end of the year—unless, of course, there are new elections and Venezuela's Opposition leader is elevated to the position of President.

What has happened in Zimbabwe has been the first glimmer of democracy in many years and yet it is clear that there is not democracy there just yet; there can be no true democracy without fear-free elections.

In my constituency, I have a number of churches that do missionary work in Swaziland and Zimbabwe. They are very active in education. They are the Elim Missions, whose headquarters is in Newtownards, in my constituency. There are very active Elim churches in my constituency, and indeed in nearby constituencies. I see that the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) is here in the Public Gallery today; there is a very active Elim church in her constituency, and there is also one in Belfast East. Collectively, they do some fantastic work in education, health and helping young people. There is also the issue of medication and HIV/AIDS, which is very prevalent in Zimbabwe.

I am well known as someone who believes in foreign aid. I believe that we should provide help in a sustainable manner to those who cannot help themselves: rather than giving them a fish, we should give them a net; and rather than have a farming show, we should show people how to farm. The ways in which we can help go on and on.

For Zimbabwe to have gone from being the breadbasket of Africa—as it was once, in its heyday, and continued to be even when Mugabe first took over—to the poverty-stricken nation that it is now is simply heartbreaking, and I sincerely believe that Zimbabweans must be helped. In this debate, we are very conscious of how we can help the ordinary Zimbabwean people.

Successful farmers helped the economy by creating jobs and wealth, but their land and farms were seized. There has been murder, destruction, the stealing of land and, as referred to by the hon. Members for Vauxhall and for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), sexual violence and

the rape of women, who have been violated. It is totally wrong that those involved in the Zimbabwe army are those who are responsible for the bestiality that we have seen in recent days.

However, it is also clear that Zimbabweans need more than simply our help in the form of foreign aid funding. The Library briefing makes something abundantly clear:

“In 2018 the UK government gave support to international and local election monitoring initiatives, including £5 million specifically to support election-related work.”

There was an onus on, and perhaps a need for us in this country to ensure that the elections were free and not corrupt, so that any illegalities did not take place. Unfortunately, it was not shown that the election was entirely fair. There were many violations and concerns were expressed. As a Christian, I pray for many countries in the world, including Zimbabwe, because we hope it can reach the democratic process, and also because I have many brothers and sisters in that country who are also Christians, and I am very conscious of that.

UK-Zimbabwe trade and investment has been at low levels over the past decade and sensitive to political and economic uncertainty. In May 2018, the CDC Group, the UK Government’s development finance institution, announced an investment facility, in partnership with Standard Chartered Bank, that would lend some US \$100 million to growing businesses in Zimbabwe—a really good idea. It was reportedly the first commercial loan by a British entity to Zimbabwe in over 20 years. Again, we as a country were trying to help Zimbabwe in the new democracy that was hopefully going to unfold, and we hoped that they would do better. In 2017, Zimbabwe was the UK’s 14th-largest export market in Africa, accounting for 2% of UK exports to Africa, and the 13th-largest source of imports from Africa, accounting for 1% of UK imports from Africa. So there were key economic links going out and coming in. Globally, Zimbabwe was the UK’s 91st-largest export market and the 108th-largest source of imports. We want to trade with Zimbabwe, but we also have to ensure that Zimbabwe has a democratic process and democratic institutions that work.

Let us look at what has happened recently. The hon. Members for Vauxhall and for Rochford and Southend East have already referred to this. The internet was deliberately stopped by the Government for three days; roads, schools and banks are closed; the very fabric of society has broken down; hundreds of people have been arrested simply because they were protesting about the hike in the price of fuel and food. If people and their families are starving and the new President has told them there will be a brand-new beginning, no wonder they ask, “Where is this new beginning?” People were unable to communicate for the most basic of reasons, all to ensure that no message could be spread other than the ZANU-PF propaganda.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall mentioned some of the reports on TV, which I have seen as well. The TVs did not lie. Behind the army trucks in Zimbabwe were soldiers kicking, beating and taking violent action against innocents on the street. So I ask this question: whenever the evidential base is there, how come action is not taken?

Kate Hoey

I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but he has mentioned the media and television; I want to praise Christina Lamb, the Sunday Times international reporter, for her work and the reports that she has brought back, which graphically describe some of the abuses that the hon. Gentleman talks about.

Jim Shannon

I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She reiterates the facts of the case that we all know of. There is evidence of violence, corruption, attacks on women, and the stealing of property. I do not say that everyone is innocent; some looting has taken place, but that does not take away from the overall corruption within the new Government. Such attacks are not the actions of a democratic Government. They are the actions displayed by Mugabe during his dictatorship, which we thought we had got rid of. Very little has changed, which is so sad, but it must change if we are to continue working so closely with the Government.

It is believed that Zimbabwe's application to rejoin the Commonwealth, submitted in May 2018, having withdrawn from the organisation in 2003, is being considered, and the Government said in April 2018 that they would "strongly support Zimbabwe's re-entry".

To me, Zimbabwe has done little to engender that level of support and we need to be very careful about what we do. Membership of the Commonwealth has many facets: respect for the Queen, respect for others, and dedication to running a country in a democratic way. So are we really supporting Zimbabwe by bringing it back into the Commonwealth, which I would love to see, but with conditions that have to be met? We cannot expect it to come in willy-nilly and continue what it is doing. Should we really support that at this time? Should we be willing to observe, monitor and regulate what is happening? I understand that membership of the Commonwealth allows us perhaps to have a greater influence that we can use for the good of some countries, but if the millions that we pour in are not influencing—this is the question I ask—I fail to see how our support of membership will influence.

In conclusion, I understand that changes are not made overnight, but there has been time and there has been no improvement for the people on the farms—the breadbaskets of Zimbabwe. There has been time, but no improvement for schoolchildren and teachers who have small wages and not even books in schools; no improvement for patients and doctors, so money needs to be spent there; and no sign of change. We must make it clear that giving time is not the answer. Action is the only answer, and we must see it now.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP)

I am grateful for the opportunity to begin the summing up in this debate, Mrs Main. I commend the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) for securing the debate and thank her for a very informative summary of where Zimbabwe has been in the recent past. She put into context what has been happening there in the past few weeks. The hon. Members for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have contributed their own knowledge, highlighting the underlying problems that have to be addressed before Zimbabwe can be returned to its people. Truly fundamental in the governance of any country is that the people should be allowed to govern themselves. The country should be governed in the interests of the people and not only in the interests of those who govern.

In any debate about alleged human rights abuses in another country there are two principles that we have to observe. First, we have to recognise the rights of nations to govern themselves. We have no right to interfere in the internal affairs of another country in normal circumstances. What is happening in Zimbabwe now cannot be allowed to become normal circumstances, because the sovereignty of individual nations has to be tempered by the fact that there are standards of behaviour and fundamental human rights that transcend all national borders. Where there is evidence that the power of the state is being abused to deny fundamental human rights, the international community, countries individually and collectively, have not only a right but a duty to intervene to set things right, initially through political and diplomatic efforts, but if necessary by the use of economic influence as well. I certainly take on board the caution advised by the hon. Member

for Vauxhall about using economic sanctions, because too often the sanctions punish the victims without having any impact on the perpetrators.

There are obvious difficulties in knowing what exactly has been happening in Zimbabwe, but some things are clear and unambiguous, giving grounds for serious concern among the international community. I think they add up to overwhelming evidence that the international community has got to intervene.

There were large-scale protests after massive price increases left millions of Zimbabweans unable to afford the basic essentials of life. There were people with jobs who could not get to work because the bus fare was more than they would be paid. The police and army intervened in the protests and there has been significant loss of life, and significant numbers of people have been injured. Reliable reports are that at least 12 people have been killed, and 78 others were treated for gunshot wounds.

A significant number were treated for other injuries. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, a body appointed by the Zimbabwean Government, has identified at least 240 cases of assault and torture. We should commend the commission for having the courage to speak out. Many institutions in Zimbabwe, even if they are not put under the cosh by the Government, sometimes think that they are there to do the Government's bidding. It is all the more remarkable that the human rights commission is publishing such specific, utterly damning indictments of the country's Government.

More than 700 people have been arrested. Often, as the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) said, there are wholesale arrests, when anyone who happens to be in a house close to an alleged incident is arrested, usually with extreme violence. People are often viciously beaten before being dragged away. Boys as young as 11 have been seen being beaten by gangs of uniformed police officers in the street. There has also been clear targeting of anyone seen as a political opponent of the Government. In one case, a councillor—not even an MP or shadow Minister—was dragged from his house, beaten almost to death and arrested, in front of his three-year-old daughter. Remarkably, that wee girl was able, despite the trauma she experienced, to give a detailed account of what happened. Hopefully one day soon her evidence will help to make sure that those responsible are brought to justice.

There have been numerous allegations—and numbers are increasing—of women being gang-raped by uniformed soldiers. It is all very well for Ministers in the Zimbabwean Government to say, "If this has happened to you, come forward and make a complaint, and we will deal with it." It is difficult in western European democracies for women to have the confidence to come forward and report that they have been raped or sexually abused. It must be difficult to the point of impossibility for a woman in Zimbabwe to report such a vicious assault to the authorities whose very people are responsible in the first place.

The changing response from the authorities is notable and revealing. Initially, as always happens in such cases, they tried to deny anything had happened. They denied that there had been violence and said that such violence as there was had somehow been the responsibility of the protestors. Then they admitted that the police and army had used force, but claimed that it had been proportionate. A Government spokesman told the BBC, "When things get out of hand, a bit of firmness is needed".

It was only when there was incontrovertible video evidence that could not be claimed to be fake, making it clear that police and army officers were involved in assaults, that the authorities finally accepted it had been happening. Chillingly, the President's own spokesperson said the crackdown was "just a foretaste of things to come".

We have to wonder whether the few police and army officers who have been arrested are being used as examples. Their cases seem to be the ones where the evidence is so overwhelming that no one can deny what happened. We must wonder whether a cynical attempt is being made by Mnangagwa and his colleagues to look as if they are on the side of justice, when all the evidence points to their being at least complacent about, and possibly actively complicit in, the brutality. It is clear that the vast majority of Zimbabwean citizens have no confidence in the Government's ability or even willingness to enforce the rule of law on its own law enforcers. The Government may blame rogue elements in the security forces, but they have a responsibility to control the behaviour of everyone they put into uniform in those forces, and the international community must take steps to ensure that they carry out that responsibility. If President Mnangagwa wants to be accepted as President he has to start accepting his responsibilities as President. Being the President, Prime Minister or monarch of any country is not a way for someone to enrich themselves and their pals at everyone else's expense.

I want briefly to share the experiences of two of my constituents who were forced to flee from Zimbabwe during the regime of Robert Mugabe. Although in some ways their experiences may not seem directly relevant to what has happened recently, they illustrate many of the fundamental problems continuing to affect the country, which make it more difficult now for justice to be done, and be seen to be done. Paul and Brenda-Lee Westwood ran a successful business in Zimbabwe in partnership with a local businessman. Their share of the business was seized by someone who at that time was an MP in Mugabe's ZANU-PF party. The seizure was illegal even under the so-called indigenisation policies of the Government of the day. Those responsible were put on trial for a fraud valued at more than \$1 million but the case collapsed in circumstances that remain unclear. After Mr Westwood lodged an appeal the prosecutor died in mysterious circumstances and several of the accused and key witnesses disappeared and, as far as I know, have never been seen again.

The Westwoods then experienced months of intense intimidation with increasingly violent and explicit threats against them and their children. Eventually in 2012 after enduring that for several years, they abandoned the life they had built together and fled the country. Since then they have been trying to have their case heard in the Zimbabwean courts but, like the victims of the recent brutality, they can see nothing to make them believe that the new Government will make their chance of a fair hearing any greater. I know that the Minister and some of her colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have been working on my constituents' behalf, and I thank them.

The new Government in Zimbabwe is keen to rejoin the Commonwealth. I can understand why at one point a number of people and the UK Government would have been keen on that happening. I would support the UK Government in helping Zimbabwe to become fit to rejoin the Commonwealth, but it would be a disastrous mistake to encourage or support an application when, clearly, it is not fit for membership of that honourable organisation. We need to make it clear that it cannot rejoin the Commonwealth until it can demonstrate beyond doubt that it has fully re-established the rule of law and the principle of respect for the human rights of all its people, regardless of creed, colour, race, gender or political views. I have a duty to represent my constituents, and I argue that people such as the Westwoods, and others who have suffered similar ordeals at the hands of the Zimbabwean Government, must receive a fair hearing. If an impartial court so rules, they should be given proper compensation for their loss.

There must at best be severe doubt about whether the investigation of recent atrocities and the holding to account of those who committed the crimes, gave the orders, or stood by and watched can be left to the Zimbabwean Government. I do not think it can. The rule of law has become so unreliable that those incidents can be properly investigated only with outside help. That is what

must happen, because what has happened in Zimbabwe is too serious to be ignored as an isolated, localised problem.

For generations—perhaps centuries—the people of Zimbabwe seem to have been misruled and mismanaged by almost everyone. That has lasted from the absurdity of their country, and often their lives, being seen as the possessions of a Government thousands of miles away, to the appalling racialism of the Smith regime and, more recently, the combination of disastrous economic incompetence and rampant corruption under Mugabe. That has meant that in a country whose natural resources are sufficient to give all its people a very decent standard of living the majority of the population are reduced to absolute poverty. I want the Government, in co-operation with other Governments and through bodies such as the Commonwealth and the United Nations, to help the people of Zimbabwe to see how to take their country back from the despots and dictators who have held sway over them for far too long.

What is sometimes called soft power, or soft influence, is often important. Exchange visits would enable elected politicians and others involved in civic society in Zimbabwe to come to the United Kingdom or other countries to see how things are and how they operate, in what looks like a reasonable democratic society. They could then see that it is possible for differences to be resolved without guns, tear gas and violence. We have to ask ourselves, just now, whether the way politics is being done in the United Kingdom is all that good an example for Zimbabwe or anyone else. Do some of the scenes that we have witnessed in the House of Commons Chamber in the past couple of days look like—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair)

Order. The hon. Gentleman is straying far off the topic of the debate. Can he please confine his remarks to the topic of Zimbabwe? I do not wish to hear too much about yesterday's debate.

Peter Grant

I will, Mrs Main. I suggest that the United Kingdom, and any other country that wants to set an example to the people of Zimbabwe about how democracies can operate, sometimes need to make sure that they are as good examples as they think they are.

The people of Zimbabwe have been through more than the people of any nation on Earth should be expected to tolerate. I want to see the day when Zimbabwe is returned to its people, and the citizens of Zimbabwe are able to enjoy the rights that all citizens should have: the right to self-expression; the right to assemble; the right to disagree with and protest against their Government; and the right to remove their Government and replace it with a Government of their choice, if that is their wish. I look forward to the Minister telling us what the Government of these islands can do to help the people of Zimbabwe achieve that goal.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairwomanship, Mrs Main. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) for securing this important debate; Zimbabwe is a subject upon which she is very knowledgeable, and I thank her for her comprehensive introduction to the debate.

It is vital that we take this opportunity to discuss the violence that erupted in Zimbabwe earlier this month. A short debate on this issue also took place in the House of Lords on 21 January, which covered many of the points that have been raised today. As evidenced by the tone and content of this debate and the debate in the other place, there is clear concern about problems in Zimbabwe, ranging from currency problems to violent protests. I know that Zimbabwean people feel that way as well.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab)

This is an excellent debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) on securing it. My father grew up in what was then Rhodesia and is now Zimbabwe, and I remember the turbulent times during the civil war; I also remember the optimism when that country became Zimbabwe, and the recent optimism when Mugabe was ousted. However, does my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) agree that the current unrest is causing huge challenges for our charities, especially for Love Zimbabwe, a charity in Wales that operates in Chinamhora village?

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair)

Order. I know that the hon. Lady might have wanted to speak in this debate, but there was a lot of time for her to do so. Interventions need to be brief.

Liz McInnes

I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She has highlighted several issues, one of which is the hope that existed in Zimbabwe when Robert Mugabe finally left his position as President. Sadly, I think we have all become a little bit like the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), going from optimistic about the future to slightly pessimistic.

Zimbabwean people have expressed their concerns to me and, as evidenced by the comments made in this debate, other Members' Zimbabwean constituents have also approached them with issues. Trade union and civil society groups in Zimbabwe regularly contact me to express their utter helplessness and despair in reaction to numerous human rights abuses, many of which occurred under the Mugabe regime and are now happening again. I was recently contacted by the TUC, which is concerned that the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions' secretary general, Japhet Moyo, has been arrested and charged with subverting a constitutionally elected Government, along with the ZCTU's president Peter Mutasa. Both men have been remanded until 8 February, which highlights the fact that at the moment, anyone in Zimbabwe who raises their voice in opposition to the Government is targeted.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op)

My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, in addition to the speeches that have been made so far. She mentioned constituents raising concerns, and my constituent Abigail has raised with me her concerns as a Zimbabwean, particularly about the oppression that my hon. Friend mentioned. It is clear that Zimbabwe is failing to adhere to the Patterson principles that underpin readmission to the Commonwealth, and until we have a robust understanding that Zimbabwe is making steps to adhere to those principles, readmission to the Commonwealth is not going to happen. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister needs to make a clear statement to that effect?

Liz McInnes

I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is right to bring up the issue of Zimbabwe's readmission to the Commonwealth; I think every Member who spoke in the debate has raised that issue, and I will be referring to it later. I am sure that the Minister will be able to speak with some authority on that topic.

The Zimbabwean people are tired of the systemic issues that have plagued their nation for so many decades. It has been said that people in Harare complain that the new Administration is akin to a new driver in an old taxi. It was recently my privilege to visit South Africa, where I met many members of the Zimbabwean diaspora who expressed to us the same views regarding the lack of any change. The figurehead may have changed, but they were pessimistic that the country itself would

change. As many Members said, the current violence erupted following the Government's hiking of the price of fuel, making it the most expensive anywhere in the world. The Government's response has been to blame the fuel shortages that caused that violence on those who hoard fuel and trade it on the black market, and while there may be some truth in that argument, those fuel shortages have been compounded by the Government's mismanagement of the currency crisis.

The Government must also take responsibility for their subsequent actions. The violence that followed a general strike on 14 January was utterly deplorable: in the cities of Harare and Bulawayo, protesters faced a vicious clampdown, in which soldiers as well as police were deployed to shut down peaceful protests. The figures are not totally reliable, but there seem to have been around 12 confirmed deaths; at least 78 gunshot injuries; between 700 and 1,500 detentions; and 844 human rights violations. The Government's shutdown of internet services during the violent outbreak, severely disrupting the flow of information and hiding and obscuring the behaviour of the army and the police, is also troubling.

Here we are again, with Zimbabweans suffering as a result of Government violence. Last year's elections represented a real opportunity for the country to change following the end of Robert Mugabe's regime. However, despite the improvements in the election process that were noted by various election observers, those elections were not free and not fair, as my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall outlined in her opening speech. The subsequent violence was nothing new in Zimbabwe, but it was particularly disappointing that the opportunity for change was not taken. That opportunity for change is still there, but the new leader is falling back into old habits. If President Mnangagwa is to avoid gaining the same reputation as his predecessor, he must act swiftly to restore the hope that existed last summer and put an end to attacks on civilians. We do not want history to repeat itself, nor do the Zimbabwean people. The future could be so positive for Zimbabwe, but its people will need help in getting there.

Mr Sweeney

My hon. Friend talks about the need for help to be provided. Of course, DFID will be providing international aid, as I am sure the Minister will confirm. However, does my hon. Friend share my concern that such aid may be manipulated by the Government to punish political enemies, and does she agree that DFID must put safeguards in place to make sure that does not happen?

Liz McInnes

My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am sure the Minister will be able to respond to that question. It is my understanding that the majority of DFID funding goes to NGOs, not directly to Governments. I hope that will help ensure that the aid reaches the people it needs to reach. Many have spoken about the application for Zimbabwe to rejoin the Commonwealth. Rejoining would have benefits for Zimbabwe. It would vastly improve its relationship with our country and countries around the world, but we cannot just gift Commonwealth membership to Zimbabwe. A return to the Commonwealth must be conditional on Zimbabwe's resolving its infringements of the Harare declaration of 1991. It would help if the Minister could explain whether her Government will prioritise human rights and do what they can to ensure that Zimbabwe is not allowed to rejoin the Commonwealth until its Government implement significant reforms and stop the violent crackdowns by security forces on the public that we have seen in the past two weeks.

I am pleased to hear that the Minister met the Zimbabwean ambassador recently, and I am sure she will elaborate on the outcome of that meeting. Will she say what she has been doing with our partners in Europe and with the African Union to ensure that the programme of reform for Zimbabwe outlined 12 months ago at the EU-AU summit is maintained? Finally, I know she met the

EU and the African Union last week. What action is planned for Zimbabwe? In addition, what specific action will the UK Government take?

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) on securing this important and timely debate. We have had excellent and well-informed contributions not only from the hon. Lady, but from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) and the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). We also had interesting interventions from other colleagues who get credible information from a range of different sources. I pay tribute to the long-standing interest of the hon. Member for Vauxhall in Zimbabwe, including as chair of the all-party parliamentary group. I add my voice to those of colleagues who have spoken so highly of her ongoing engagement.

I can only add the Government's view to the many examples that have been cited about the situation on the ground. The recent developments in Zimbabwe are cause for significant concern for Her Majesty's Government. The response of Zimbabwe's security forces to protests against the petrol price rise has been disproportionate and all too reminiscent of the darkest days of the Mugabe regime. Security forces have used live ammunition, carried out widespread and indiscriminate arrests and unleashed brutal assaults on civilians, with clear disregard for the due process of law.

I have the up-to-date figures that we have sourced. We pay tribute to the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, which has recorded a wide range of human rights violations since the protests began on 14 January. We recognise at least eight deaths and many injuries. There are credible reports that arrests may exceed 1,000. Certainly, 873 arrests or detentions were documented by 29 January.

Many are still detained. The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum reports at least 470 cases of assault, 80 of which have been gunshot-related. Many of us have seen footage of young men, and even children, allegedly scarred from beatings by soldiers. We have also seen atrocious accounts of security forces raping civilians during their violent crackdown, with indications of at least nine reported rapes, some of which appear to be politically motivated.

On the subject of rape and sexual assault more generally, I confirm that DFID has extensive programming to support victims of rape. That includes shelter, counselling, case management, medical treatment and access to justice services. That includes some of the most recent cases linked to the suppression of protests. That addresses some of the points that Members raised.

We have been absolutely clear that the abuses and the failure to follow the due process of law contravene the fundamental tenets of international human rights standards and have no place in a democratic society. President Mnangagwa's return to Zimbabwe was a full 10 days into the crisis. He committed to holding his security forces to account for human rights violations and spoke of the urgent need for a national dialogue and reconciliation. I am sure colleagues would agree that words are good, but that they need to be followed by deeds.

President Mnangagwa must act to stop the abuses and make good on those commitments. We are particularly concerned by the targeting of opposition and civil society in the wake of the protests. The abuses have continued since his return to the country. His Administration must act now and learn lessons from the events and the tragic violence that followed the election on 1 August 2018. The President must, as he promised, implement the recommendations of the commission of inquiry into the 1 August violence.

[Sir Christopher Chope in the Chair]
4.00 pm

Harriett Baldwin

As I was saying, President Mnangagwa must address the finding of the commission that the use of force by his security services was unjustified and disproportionate. The Government's internet shutdown was also a disturbing curtailing of freedom of expression and the media. I was pleased that the High Court of Zimbabwe ruled the shutdown unconstitutional on 22 January.

The UK Government have been robust in our response to the crackdown, including working with the EU. Targeted EU suspended sanctions remain in place, including on Vice-President Chiwenga. I summoned the Zimbabwean ambassador on 17 January and told the ambassador that we expected Zimbabwe's security forces to stop using disproportionate force, and that the Government should reinstate full internet access and investigate all allegations of human rights violations. The Foreign Secretary repeated that message publicly to President Mnangagwa on 21 January.

Last week, I met the African Union Commissioner for Peace and Security to raise concerns about Zimbabwe. Yesterday, I spoke to Foreign Minister Moyo to reiterate our concern and to call for an end to ongoing human rights abuses. I am also travelling to the region this week, to urge a co-ordinated international approach to the crisis.

Our ambassador in Harare, Melanie Robinson, has delivered the same messages locally. She met Home Affairs Minister Mathema on 23 January and Foreign Minister Moyo on 25 January. The ambassador also met the Opposition leader, Nelson Chamisa, on 16 January. She has also been meeting civil society groups supporting victims of the violence and working to bring perpetrators to account. The team that we have on the ground in Zimbabwe has been absolutely outstanding throughout. I pay tribute to our entire diplomatic service and to our DFID civil servants.

At the end of the day, Ministers are advised by civil servants, but it is we who decide. The programme of clear-eyed engagement with the new regime to encourage free and fair elections is one that I am happy to answer to in Parliament.

DFID supports the Commonwealth Local Government Forum. In fact, the UK provides extensive financial and technical assistance to a range of civil society organisations in Zimbabwe. They help to support Zimbabwean citizens to hold the state to account. I am sure that colleagues will understand that we do not publicise the names of our partners, to avoid putting them at risk. That in itself is an indictment of the Zimbabwean regime.

I assure colleagues that extensive work is being done on the humanitarian side, that no aid is channelled through the Government of Zimbabwe, and that the UK will continue to play a key role in ensuring that the very poorest in Zimbabwe will have their suffering minimised during this period when economic reforms need to be undertaken. It is vital that Zimbabwe's political leaders focus on doing what is best for its people, with all parties rejecting violence and upholding the rule of law.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair)

There is a Division in the House. Does the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) wish to respond to the debate? She is indicating that she does not. In that case, we will conclude the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved, That this House has considered the situation in Zimbabwe. © Parliamentary Copyright

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