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Summary of Report

Elections & Governance

Mugabe's party sees possible 2011 Zimbabwe elections

President Robert Mugabe's party says there is "no reason" for Zimbabwe not to hold elections in 2011, but analysts believe the polls could be much later over demands for more reforms to guarantee a free and fair vote.

Swaziland: Swazi journalists threatened with death

Swazi traditional authorities threatened Swazi journalists with death if they continued to write stories considered by the authorities as undermining the country's leadership and system of government.

Politics

Zimbabwe Meeting Sparks Hope for Unity Government

Political observers say a meeting, in Zimbabwe, of national executives of the unity government's three political parties has raised optimism about the country's political future. The group gathered to discuss issues that have been outstanding since the coalition government was formed, including political violence and freedom of association.

Zimbabwe's Coalition Parties Meet in Rare Talks

For the first time Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF party's politburo and the national executive committees of the two Movement for Democratic Change parties met on Wednesday to discuss ways to ensure that political violence ends in Zimbabwe. The meeting in Harare was the first time the three parties' national executives have met since a unity government was formed 17 months ago.

Human Rights, Social Issues & Developments

Mandela relatives held at gunpoint in robbery bid

Two men held grandchildren of Nelson Mandela at gunpoint in an attempted robbery after they returned from a birthday celebration for the former South African president, Nelson Mandela.

In Brief: American Bar Association honours Zimbabwean lawyer

The American Bar Association has announced the Zimbabwean human rights lawyer, Beatrice Mtetwa, as the winner of the 2010 International Human Rights Award. She is awarded with this award because of the fact that she has defended ordinary Zimbabweans, journalists and politicians in against of the oppressive regime of Zimbabwe. The award was also created with the knowledge that in many countries with repressive regimes, the regime is less likely to take retaliatory action against a human rights advocate if the advocate has received international recognition.

How To: Protect your livelihood from wild animals

People and wildlife have never been in greater competition for limited resources as human populations invade shrinking natural habitats in a fight for living space, food and water. In this vignette of a planet-wide battle, IRIN looks at how to keep elephants away from your crops and raiding monkeys out of your food stores.

ZIMBABWE: Unlicensed and outdoors or no school at all

In Zimbabwe, most of the schools offering primary and secondary education are not licensed by the ministry of education. Coltrat, minister of education, said that the proliferation of these unregistered schools is a national crisis and we are very worried. He said unauthorized schools are multiplying because limited resources meant education officials could not check on them. There are no vehicles to use to visit districts and inspect the schools, as was the case when the economy was still sound.

Anti-Apartheid Hero Desmond Tutu to Retire

South African anti-apartheid leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu, who battled to end apartheid and later to promote peace and reconciliation, said in a news conference on his 79th birthday that he will retire soon from public life.

Malawi's Poor Receive Money from UNICEF Program

UNICEF (United Nations Children Fund) in partnership with Malawian government has launched the Social Cash Transfer program in Malawi. This new anti-poverty program is giving Malawi's poor an infusion of cash to help them meet their basic needs.

FAO Works to Reduce Human-Wildlife Conflict in Rural Africa

Rural Africans often face problems trying to co-exist with wildlife. Baboons steal food. Elephants stampede through their crops. And the animals are also under stress, as their habitat is lost to human settlement. But help is at hand. The Conflict Mitigation Tool Kit, created by the government of Zimbabwe and the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), offers some solutions to the competition for land and food between people and their forest neighbours.

Seven S. African police killed in helicopter crash

Seven South African policemen including senior officers were killed in a helicopter crash on Friday about 130 km (80 miles) east of Johannesburg.

Calls for Political Parties to Field 50 Percent Female Candidates

In Zambia, women have achieved very little in terms of representation in the decision making. Now, the Zambia National Women's Lobby Group (ZNWL) wants to change this trend through a campaign called "50 percent of women and men in leadership for equitable development." The lobby group is hoping to compel political parties to adopt 50 percent of women as candidates in the 2011 Parliamentary and local government elections.

Food Security & Health Issues

Circumcision could halt 4 mln new African HIV cases

More than 4 million new HIV infections could be prevented in eastern and southern Africa by 2025 if male circumcision rates were increased to 80 percent, researchers said on Tuesday.

S. Africa eager to see speedy roll-out of AIDS gel

South Africa is considering rolling out use of a vaginal gel which can protect women against HIV during sex before it is officially licensed by drug regulators, the country's health minister said on Tuesday.

Refugees/IDPs & Migration

Army sent to S. Africa Township after migrants attacked

South Africa's military joined police on Tuesday to patrol an impoverished Johannesburg township after assaults on foreign migrants injured at least 11 and increased concerns of a fresh wave of xenophobic attacks.

China-Africa Relations

AU says must replace Western partners with China

The African Union said on Saturday Africa must turn ever more to China for its development because conditions and checks often hindered the flow of funds from Western nations and the World Bank. Maxwell Mkwezalamba, the AU's economic chief, said Africa must end its reliance on Western money. He was of the view that we need to diversify our partners that we work with and hence for us working with China is something that we have welcomed.

Peace keeping conflict resolution and security analysis

ANGOLA: Cabindan separatists in exile deny end to conflict

Offers of peace by senior officials of the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC), which seemingly ended a long-standing separatist conflict in northern Angola, were made without the knowledge or consent of its president, Henrique N'Zita Tiago. FLEC's exiled Secretary General, Joel Batila, dismissed Bento Bembe's MOU, and offers of peace by a group of senior FLEC office-holders, as "a coup d'etat organised by Angola". Batila said FLEC's chief of staff, Stanislas Boma, vice president Alexandre Tati, security chief Carlos Luembe, and foreign affairs minister Luis Veras recently visited Luanda without the authority of the movement's president, and subsequently declared the armed struggle of more than 35 years at an end. He said the four senior officials were no longer regarded as office-holders of FLEC.

Detailed Report

Elections & Governance

Mugabe's party sees possible 2011 Zimbabwe elections

(Alert Net)

20 July 2010

HARARE, July 20 (Reuters) - President Robert Mugabe's party says there is "no reason" for Zimbabwe not to hold elections in 2011, but analysts believe the polls could be much later over demands for more reforms to guarantee a free and fair vote.

Mugabe, 86, was forced into a power-sharing pact with his rival Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai more than a year ago after a crisis over a 2008 national election that local and foreign observers say was marred by violence and vote-rigging.

In public, both Mugabe's ZANU-PF and Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) have been telling their party structures to stay ready for elections, but privately their officials say the polls are at least two years away.

In a statement posted on its website this week, headlined "Elections inevitable," ZANU-PF says there are serious political differences in the fragile coalition -- which Mugabe has likened to water and oil -- and Zimbabwe should go for elections when the government's two-year mandate ends next year.

"Given this situation, there is no reason why the people of Zimbabwe should not go for elections when the inclusive government expires next year," it says, dismissing observations by some critics that Zimbabwe was not ready for new elections.

"ZANU-PF has clearly stated that it is ready for elections. The only question now is, are both factions of the MDC ready?" it added.

Under the power-sharing arrangement, fresh elections would have been held in 2011 after a referendum on a new constitution, but the process to write a new charter is nearly a year behind.

Analysts see the latest ZANU-PF statement as part of a broad strategy of mobilising its own ranks and confusing opponents.

To add further confusion, Mugabe's information minister and ZANU-PF political commissar Webster Shamu has turned up the party music at the state broadcaster ZBC with a new set of videos extolling Mugabe and ZANU-PF's leadership role.

MANAGING ZANU-PF DYNAMICS

"There is nothing inevitable about next year," said Lovemore Madhuku, head of pressure group National Constitutional Assembly.

"What I see is a strategy of managing both the internal dynamics within ZANU-PF, and the outside ones, with the MDC, by creating a sense of uncertainty," he told Reuters.

"I don't think ZANU-PF is sure about the electoral outcome and I don't see how they can be in any hurry," Madhuku said.

Political analysts say Mugabe's strategy is to hold on to power for as long as possible while re-organising his party that was fractured by the near loss of power in 2008.

Tsvangirai's MDC is insisting on minimum democratic conditions before fresh elections are held.

Mugabe, who has ruled Zimbabwe since independence from Britain in 1980, has already conceded on the establishment of an independent electoral commission, a human rights watchdog and the partial opening up of the media.

But critics say Mugabe still retains sweeping presidential powers and security laws he has used to stifle opponents and still commands military and police forces hostile to the MDC.

They say ZANU-PF may still manipulate the process to write the new constitution, which many Zimbabweans hope will reduce presidential powers and strengthen parliament's oversight role. In what many see as a deliberate strategy to undermine the MDC in the countryside, Mugabe's militants have mobilised rural voters to confront the MDC over accusations the party is advocating gay rights in the new constitution.

Gays and lesbians are largely frowned upon in Zimbabwe.

"They are trying to subvert the whole process by suggesting that the MDC is pursuing issues that are not a priority, and to me that is not the stance of a party confident about elections," said John Makumbe, a veteran Mugabe critic and political commentator.

Swaziland: Swazi journalists threatened with death

(Africa Files)

23 July 2010

Swazi traditional authorities threatened Swazi journalists with death if they continued to write stories considered by the authorities as undermining the country's leadership and system of government. The death warning came from Prince Mahlaba, brother to King Mswati III and also a member of the King's advisory council, the Swazi National Council Standing Committee (SNC), which is a highly influential body in Swazi politics. The senior prince issued his warning during the final day of a two-day national dialogue

dubbed as Smart Partnership held in Manzini, the second city. It was during a question-and-answer session in which the authorities engaged the media in dialogue.

According to a report in the Times of Swaziland newspaper, Prince Mahlaba said he had been monitoring what he believed were clandestine manoeuvres in the media that sought to undermine the country's leadership and system of governance and said that for prolonged periods of time he has been silent hoping that the journalists would come to their senses and stop their 'bad writing'. The prince said it was now clear that some journalists were hell-bent on destabilizing the country and warned that they would die if they persisted. "It is a fact that journalists earn their living by writing lies and if they do not write the lies then their source of livelihood is threatened and this is a fact and beyond debate. I want to warn the media to bury things that have the potential of undermining the country rather than publish all and everything even when such reports are harmful to the country's international image. Journalists who continue to write bad things about the country will die", threatened Prince Mahlaba.

In response, the Times' Managing Editor, Mbongeni Mbingo, who formed part of the media panel answering questions from the authorities, called the prince to order and wondered why journalists are now threatened with death and made scapegoats by authorities. MISA-Swaziland strongly condemns the threat from the prince and calls on him to publicly withdraw it forthwith as it is not only dangerous and uncalled for, but also completely out of place and seriously undermines press freedom. Coming from a prince and a senior advisor to the King, the threat has the potential to intimidate the media and instil further fear in the newsrooms. Already the Swazi media is operating under a hostile environment characterized by imposed and self-censorship. Such statements by the prince only worsen the situation. MISA-Swaziland also calls on the Prime Minister, who is head of government, to publicly call the prince to order as his statement not only instigates violence against journalists but is also against the spirit of the constitution which encourages freedom of expression and the media.

Politics

Zimbabwe Meeting Sparks Hope for Unity Government

(Voice of America)

22 July 2010

Political observers say a meeting in Zimbabwe Wednesday of national executives of the unity government's three political parties has raised optimism about the country's political future. The group gathered to discuss issues that have been outstanding since the coalition government was formed, including political violence and freedom of association.

Political scientist at the University of Zimbabwe Eldred Masunugure called the meeting of three executive committees a "very significant development."

The analyst said policymakers for the three parties must reassure the public that they are serious about fulfilling a political agreement signed in September 2008, which served as the foundation for the coalition government that formally came into power in early 2009.

President Robert Mugabe has said previously his ZANU-PF party has gone as far as necessary with the political agreement. But the United States and the European Union have kept in place financial and travel restrictions on Mr. Mugabe and some of his associates.

Welshman Ncube, secretary-general for the smaller Democratic Change party said there has been much finger-pointing about past political violence. But, Ncube said, officials at the meeting agreed that President Mugabe's party was responsible for most of the political violence in the last 10 years.

"At least there is acceptance, if we talk about the past violence...that ZANU-PF, as a party, or through its agents or people it controls, did commit violence against many people," said Ncube. "There is acceptance about that. There might be excuses given for it, but I don't think anyone can deny the existence of that violence. The issue is, what can we do, and how do we move forward?"

He also said there was consensus at the meeting that Zimbabwe's Global Political Agreement, or GPA, which was signed by leaders of all three parties, has not yet been fulfilled.

"There was, of course, concern that there are some provisions in the GPA, not fully implemented, and that we must implement the GPA in its entirety," he said.

The MDC's Ncube also said the police and army had to be engaged, as they are accused of contributing to violence themselves, or standing by while violence is committed by others.

After the meeting, the ZANU-PF secretary for administration, Didymus Mutasa, said the Organ on National Healing and Reconciliation would chart a way forward for further meetings among the three parties at all levels of society.

Tendai Biti, secretary-general to Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's MDC said he elated about the meeting, and added that no Zimbabwean should be punished for his or her party affiliation.

Analyst Eldred Masunungure said the timing of the meeting was crucial because it coincided with the start of the constitution-making process, which he said had been bogged down. He said the meeting had been arranged by Zimbabweans themselves, without any external input or influence.

South Africa has a team of mediators, which has met with the leaders of the three Zimbabwean political parties about several outstanding issues from the political agreement.

Zimbabwe's Coalition Parties Meet in Rare Talks

(Voice of America)

21 July 2010

For the first time Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF party's politburo and the national executive committees of the two Movement for Democratic Change parties met on Wednesday to discuss ways to ensure that political violence ends in Zimbabwe.

The meeting in Harare was the first time the three parties' national executives have met since a unity government was formed 17 months ago.

Following the establishment of the unity government, a multi-party Committee for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration was formed to try to heal some of the scars of political violence since Zimbabwe's independence from the United Kingdom in 1980.

The healing committee has traveled to several regions of the country to persuade victims and perpetrators to face one another and tell their stories.

More than 100 delegates from the three parties agreed by consensus that there could be no national healing without justice and compensation, and that the police must arrest anyone who commits violence.

MDC Secretary-General Tendai Biti described the meeting as historic and said the challenge was to ensure that no Zimbabwean ever attacks or kills another on the basis of political affiliation.

Most of the political violence of the decade followed the emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change, or MDC, which came close to winning elections in 2000.

Domestic and international human rights monitoring groups, such as Human Rights Watch, say that President Robert Mugabe's Zanu PF party has been responsible for most of the political violence since independence.

Although rights monitors say political violence has declined significantly since the unity government came to power, the MDC says some of its members, particularly in rural areas, are still being attacked.

Human Rights, Social Issues & Developments

Mandela relatives held at gunpoint in robbery bid

(Reuters)

22 July 2010

(Reuters) - Two men held grandchildren of Nelson Mandela at gunpoint in an attempted robbery after they returned from a birthday celebration for the former South African president, police said on Thursday.

One of the robbery suspects fired a shot and both assailants fled when a family driver returned fire. No one was injured and no property was stolen in the incident that took place at a family home in Johannesburg, said police Brigadier Govindsamy Mariemuthoo.

"The driver transporting the grandchildren of Mr Mandela had just moved into the gates when they were approached by two unknown gunmen," he said.

The group was ordered to lie on the ground and then there was the exchange of gunfire.

The attempted robbery came about a month after Mandela attended the funeral of his granddaughter Zenani Mandela, 13, who was killed in a car crash.

Mandela was with his family on Sunday for birthday celebrations when he turned 92.

In Brief: American Bar Association honours Zimbabwean lawyer

(IRIN)

19 July 2010

JOHANNESBURG, 19 July 2010 (IRIN) - "Things are not all right in Zimbabwe," said human rights lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa, delighted that the American Bar Association (ABA) has decided to honour her because it draws attention to the fact.

The ABA announced that the feisty lawyer, who has defended ordinary Zimbabweans, journalists and politicians, as the winner of the 2010 International Human Rights Award.

"People assume that there has been an inclusive government in place in Zimbabwe for the past 18 months, but there has been no restoration of the rule of law," she told IRIN. "The award has inspired me."

Morgan Tsvangirai's opposition Movement for Democratic Change formed a unity government with President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF in 2009, after violent elections in which ZANU-PF lost its majority in parliament for the first time since independence from Britain in 1980.

Mtsetwa has worked for more than 20 years to protect press freedom from government restrictions that have threatened media independence and all opposing speech in Zimbabwe.

"The award was created with the knowledge that in many countries with repressive regimes, the regime is less likely to take retaliatory action against a human rights advocate if the advocate has received international recognition," said an ABA press release.

Past recipients include the well-known Sudanese human rights lawyer Salih Mahmoud Osman, who spent over two decades providing free legal representation to victims arbitrarily detained, tortured, and subjected to serious human rights abuses in Sudan.

How To: Protect your livelihood from wild animals

(IRIN)

22 July 2010

JOHANNESBURG, 22 July 2010 (IRIN) - People and wildlife have never been in greater competition for limited resources as human populations invade shrinking natural habitats in a fight for living space, food and water. In this vignette of a planet-wide battle, IRIN looks at how to keep elephants away from your crops and raiding monkeys out of your food stores.

Human-wildlife conflict (HWC) threatens the continued survival of a growing number of species, and more and more often is presenting a significant hazard to crops, livestock, property, and even lives.

"The increasing conflict is related to human development needs, demographic expansion and extended agricultural practices," René Czudek, Forestry and Wildlife Officer at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Southern Africa, told IRIN.

There are no global figures available on crop losses, but "to the family concerned, the loss of a patch of maize to raiding elephants can mean the loss of their food supply for a year; the difference between self-sufficiency and being destitute," Czudek said.

With the world's human population expanding by some 75 million a year, people and wildlife are both squeezed for space. Africa, which has the largest reserves of wildlife is particularly at risk because its people are expected to double from one to two billion in the next 40 years, according to FAO.

The good news is that HWC has been around for a very long time. In a joint effort, FAO, the Agricultural Research for Development Centre (CIRAD), the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and other partners are tapping into centuries of experience across the continent to create a Human-Wildlife Conflict Toolkit.

"It's about finding ways to save livelihoods and the animals," said George Mapuvire of BIO-HUB, a CIRAD project funded by the French government, who is leading tests of the kit in Zimbabwe. The suggested methods, tailored to specific communities and species, should lead to mutually beneficial co-existence, he said. The solutions are often as creative as they are simple.

Offer a sandwich that bites back

Baboons are intelligent and crafty; they can raid human dwellings and are often considered an agricultural pest. Are these pillaging apes giving you a hard time? Booby-trap some bread.

"Baboons which enter vehicles or buildings to steal food may be deterred by placing a snake, preferably a live one, or a look-alike replica, in a closed loaf of bread with the soft inner removed," the toolkit suggests.

"The offending baboon, seizing the opportunity, grabs it without the customary caution usually displayed by primates, discovers the snake and faints ... hopefully learning its lesson!"

Get them drunk

More persistent baboons will need to be relocated. The kit recommends getting them "drunk and incapacitated", which is cheap, easy and non-lethal. Mapuvire notes that this is more cost-effective than bringing in rangers with tranquilizer dart guns, and can be carried out with locally available products.

Once the "problem animals" become accustomed to the taste of Mahewu – a local non-alcoholic brew - it is "beefed up with concentrated alcohol in the region of 90 percent, which the baboons don't detect". When the animal passes out it can be safely relocated.

Give them a chilli reception

Elephants spell disaster to many rural Africans. They raid crops, destroy homes and livelihoods, and sometimes even take lives. Elephants eat up to 450kg of food per day - from leaves, grass and twigs to crops - and uproot, scatter and trample as much as is eaten. FAO estimates that the annual cost of elephant raids on crops in Africa ranges from \$60 (Uganda) to \$510 (Cameroon) per affected farmer.

Angry farmers often kill elephants in retaliation and, according to WWF, wildlife authorities in Kenya shoot between 50 and 120 problem elephants every year.

So, how do you drive a full-grown six-tonne bull elephant off your property? Well, elephants hate chilli pepper. It can be grown around crops that elephants like to eat; twine can be painted with a mixture of chilli pepper and old engine oil and strung up around fields, or the chilli pepper can be burnt with elephant dung to produce a pungent smoke.

Slightly more dramatic is the trademarked "Mhiripiri Bomber", a plastic gun that shoots balls containing a highly concentrated chilli solution. Fired at a trespassing elephant the ball bursts on impact, "liberating the pepper over its body", the kit says.

The accompanying information reads: "The area struck is investigated by the trunk, in so doing it takes in the papper. For this reason, it is suspected that elephant are affected more than any other animal."

Blind them

Hippos, like elephants, are fond of raiding crops by night, but can be deterred by strong flashlights. "The brighter the light the better, which must be turned on at the last moment as close to the animal as possible," the toolkit recommends. Caution should be exercised because hippos are unpredictable, and may charge instead of running away.

Stink them out

Certain species of wildlife, especially bush pigs, are sensitive to strong scents and are successfully repelled by them, Mapuvire said.

"The pungent smell emanating from burning old tyres or old engine oil" is particularly effective, the tool kit says. However, "this should not be carried out routinely ... rather have everything ready and then fire it up when the animals enter [the cleared area]."

The cosmetics industry offers another solution: "Bush pigs are so sensitive to smell that they may also be repelled by using strong scented perfumes and soap, sprayed every two metres around the crop," the kit suggests.

Employ a donkey or wildebeest

Training guard dogs is a good way to warn of approaching predators and keep them at bay. Having dogs grow up with and follow a herd of cattle has proved very effective, Mapuvire said. The toolkit says, "In Namibia, wildebeest have been used in the same way and are raised as orphans to protect livestock."

Why settle for a dog if you can get a donkey to the job? According to FAO, in some parts of Kenya donkeys are used to drive off large carnivores like lions, cheetahs and hyenas by braying, biting and kicking. "The carnivores do not like them, and particularly the noise they make when they feel the carnivores approach," Czudek said.

Fence yourself in

Reports from Zambia and Mozambique conclude that crocodiles are responsible for the greatest number of human deaths attributable to animals, with an estimated 300 annual fatalities in Mozambique alone, FAO said.

The tool kit advises strong fencing at watering points, but points out that crocodiles are less likely to attack humans or livestock in places where there are abundant fish stocks. Avoiding over-fishing would thus be one way of reducing the danger of being eaten.

These examples are by no means all-encompassing. Once completed and thoroughly tested, the Human-Wildlife Conflict Toolkit will offer a wide range of solutions to dealing with HWC - from high-tech GPS tracking collars on lions to noisy tin cans filled with pebbles; from soft approaches like shouting, to lethal cyanide poison.

Mapuvire said the best way to reduce conflict between wild animals and humans was to educate farmers and villagers. Awareness and training people to co-exist with wild animals is fundamental to the use of the HWC Toolkit.

Czudek said training had been "organized so far for wildlife practitioners/extensionists from Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique and Botswana, and the toolkit is being tested in these countries".

An online version, open to comment and suggestion, was anticipated for August 2010 and requests had already come in for translations into French, Portuguese and other languages widely spoken in Africa.

ZIMBABWE: Unlicensed and outdoors or no school at all

(IRIN)

23 July 2010

EPWORTH, 23 July 2010 (IRIN) - Simbarashe Choga, 65, a retired teacher, is the local butcher in Epworth, some 20km northeast of Zimbabwe's capital, Harare; he is also the principal of the primary school he runs out of his shop.

"My teachers keep their records and other materials at my butchery, which operates as our head office because, as you can see, there are no buildings here," Choga told IRIN. "We have a total enrolment of 182 pupils from the first to the seventh grades, and the majority of them learn outside."

Most of the houses in Epworth have no running water or electricity and the area is best known for its high levels of crime. Choga insisted that his institution had been registered by the local municipal authority, but said most of the schools offering primary and secondary education were unlicensed, and at the ministerial level even his school was not accredited.

This means that pupils at Choga's school have to sit their grade-seven examinations for entry into high school at other institutions that have been formally licensed by the education ministry.

Choga, who employs mostly untrained teachers, complained that they had to make do with inadequate books and stationery, and urged the government to register his school,

"so that people like myself, and many others in Epworth and other parts of the country, can make education accessible to the underprivileged, who are too poor and lack learning facilities."

Good marks, for now

The United Nations Development Programme recently found that Zimbabwe had a literacy rate of 92 percent - the highest in Africa - but David Coltart, minister of education, arts, sport and culture, commented: "That hardly means anything if Zimbabwe's education system remains in the state it is today. I am not accepting congratulations."

The ailing education system, once a model for sub-Saharan Africa, has buckled and all but collapsed under the economic and political crises of the past decade, when widespread food shortages, hyperinflation, cholera outbreaks, and an almost year-long strike by teachers in 2008 led to a dramatic decline in the standard of learning.

It is not uncommon for 10 pupils to share a textbook, and although the government drastically slashed school fees in 2009, deepening poverty has put even the reduced cost of attending government schools in some areas beyond the reach of thousands of children.

"The proliferation of these unregistered schools is a national crisis, and we are very worried," Coltart told IRIN. He said unauthorized schools were multiplying because limited resources meant education officials could not check on them.

"There are no vehicles to use to visit districts and inspect the schools, as was the case when the economy was still sound. I am, however, happy that the finance minister [Tendai Biti] recently allocated my ministry money to buy 40 vehicles to use during our tours across the country."

Coltart said even though private schools played an important role in raising educational standards, this was not the case where the institutions were unregistered and were not monitored by officials from his ministry. The government recently announced that it had closed more than 100 unlicensed private tertiary colleges.

"Students going into their fourth form have to go elsewhere, as we are also not registered and cannot conduct Ordinary Level examinations. Fees are cheap here, and the parents enrol their children with us because they cannot be absorbed by the few secondary schools in the area," said Sophia Sibanda, a teacher at a school near Choga's.

"The most important thing is that these pupils know how to read and write, and get a little knowledge about geography and history," she said. "Otherwise they would get into adulthood without being able to count."

Anti-Apartheid Hero Desmond Tutu to Retire

(Voice of America)

22 July 2010

South African anti-apartheid leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu says he will retire soon from public life. Tutu, who battled to end apartheid and later to promote peace and reconciliation, announced at a news conference Thursday he would retire from public life October 7, on his 79th birthday.

He told reporters his schedule of public appearances had grown increasingly punishing. "Instead of growing old gracefully with my family, reading and writing and praying and thinking, too much of my time has been spent at airports and in hotels," said Tutu.

He said from October he would limit his time at the office to one day per week in order to wrap up his many public responsibilities.

"The time has now come to slow down and sip, maybe, Rooibos tea with my beloved wife in the afternoon, to watch cricket and rugby and soccer and tennis; to travel to visit my children and grandchildren, rather than [go to] conferences and conventions and university campuses," said Tutu.

Tutu said he would continue to support his Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation and continue to work with a global council of statesmen called The Elders, founded by former President Nelson Mandela. Tutu said, however, that he would leave his positions at the University of Western Cape and with the United Nations Advisory Committee on the Prevention of Genocide. And he said he would no longer grant media interviews.

Ordained a priest of the Anglican Church in 1960 at the age of 30, Tutu used his clerical status to denounce the injustices of apartheid, and he was arrested repeatedly for his outspokenness. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, and was named the first black archbishop of Cape Town two years later. He used his new international stature to broaden the anti-apartheid struggle.

During the first post-apartheid elections in 1994, Tutu coined the phrase "Rainbow Nation" to describe his country. He was subsequently named chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which for 30 months heard victims testify about the atrocities committed during the apartheid era.

He retired as archbishop 14 years ago, but maintained a heavy public schedule. He continued to denounce injustices around the world and to criticize what he saw as the failings of the new South Africa.

Tutu spoke out against AIDS denial during the government of former President Thabo Mbeki, and apologized to gays and lesbians for the suffering caused by the teachings of the Anglican Church.

One of the biggest supporters of bringing the football World Cup to South Africa, Tutu was seen dancing and singing during the opening ceremonies and several matches.

Malawi's Poor Receive Money from UNICEF Program

(Voice of America)

21 July 2010

A new anti-poverty program is giving Malawi's poor an infusion of cash to help them meet their basic needs.

It's called the Social Cash Transfer program, and it's coordinated by a partnership between the government of Malawi and the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF).

The program is underway in seven of Malawi's 28 districts, including Likoma, Machinga and Mchinji.

The amount received depends on the size of the family, with a one-person household entitled to \$4.20 per month. Families receive an extra \$1.30 for each child in primary school and twice that for each child enrolled in secondary school.

UNICEF Chief of Social Policy in Malawi Mayke Huijbregts says poverty levels are high in Malawi, with over half the people living below the poverty line.

"The sad thing is that 22 percent of households are ultra poor, which means they live below...\$10 a day [or 22 (Malawian) kwacha]. [They] really have no income to generate assets to move out of poverty," she says.

The social welfare officer for Mchinji district, Ernest Chikuni, says among those targeted are the elderly, families headed by children and people with disabilities.

Helping determine eligibility is a local Community Social Protection Committee (CSPC), made up of community members, including local chiefs.

"What happens is that when these households have been identified, the names are sent to the district assembly, where members of the committee (CSPC) sit and scrutinize the names and finally approve the payments," says Chikuni.

He says the households are supposed to remain in the program for two years.

"[Then]," he explains, "we are supposed to do the retargeting. [Some] households may remain in the scheme and others will graduate from [it], depending on how we have assessed their improvement."

The project has improved the lives of those enrolled, says Chikuni.

“For instance, we have seen people building good houses with corrugated iron sheets...[and] investing in livestock [like] pigs and goats. These households are able to access medical care because they have the money and are able to travel to the nearest hospital,” Chikuni says.

One of the beneficiaries is Miriam Banda, a widow. With the \$1,800 she has been receiving since 2008, she says she has managed to build a brick house.

“I am now happy that I have built my own house from saving the little I get in a month from the scheme,” says the mother of three.

Banda and others complain the financial allotments are too small and ask the project leaders to consider increasing them.

But Huijbregts says there are no immediate plans to adjust the level of transfer, although the standard of living has shot up since the launch of the program in 2006.

“At the moment, there are issues pertaining to the scheme which need to be partaken by the government. [It’s also up to the] government to pass social protection policy before these kinds of decisions can be taken because they have financial implications,” she says.

Despite the success of the program, critics say they are not happy. One of them is Austin M’ndunga, a businessman in Mchinji.

“I totally disagree with it because it encourages laziness. [Some] villagers don’t use it in a proper way; [some] are busy drinking beer with it because it’s not a large amount of money that can really make [a difference].”

M’ndunga says it would better if the program taught skills that would help people earn a living, rather than giving them money.

But Chikuni disagrees.

“We give them (the poor) the money [to] invest in one way or the other [so they can] rely on their own when they are out of the scheme.”

The program is underway in 22 African countries, including Kenya, Lesotho, Namibia, Liberia, Zimbabwe, and Sierra Leone.

FAO Works to Reduce Human-Wildlife Conflict in Rural Africa

(Voice of America)

21 July 2010

Rural Africans often face problems trying to co-exist with wildlife. Baboons steal food. Elephants stampede through their crops. And the animals are also under stress, as their habitat is lost to human settlement.

But help is at hand. The Conflict Mitigation Tool Kit, created by the government of Zimbabwe and the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), offers some solutions to the competition for land and food between people and their forest neighbors.

The FAO's Forestry and Wildlife Officer, Rene Czudek, in Harare, Zimbabwe, explained how the kit works. "We have done quite some work on human wildlife conflict in Africa but mostly they were like paper studies, guidelines that never reached the real clients in the field. So this Tool Kit should allow us to approach the community and discuss with them the best options to prevent or mitigate human-wildlife conflict in rural Africa."

The kit contains useful information in the form of colorful tips that often come across as funny but that can help with serious problems.

"We try to put together all possible methods to prevent or mitigate human-wildlife conflict," Czudek said. "Some of them are quite funny and I think our colleagues in the communication department in Rome [used humor] to attract attention.... But the main aim is to propose methods that are cost effective and could work in rural conditions in Africa."

In one example, he explained how people can protect their crops and themselves from elephants.

"For an elephant raiding crops, we have different kinds of tools and one of them is to make chili. You just grow chili, then you can mix it with some elephant dung, then you light it with charcoal and then this burning brick will just smell bad for the elephants. Since they don't like chili pepper they will avoid going to the field," said Czudek.

The kit provides as many tools as possible, he said, because after a while the animals get used to the first method and it loses effectiveness.

"In our tool kit," he said, "we stress the need to do proper land use planning. So, if you put your crops on an elephant corridor, there is a big chance it will be raided."

The FAO says where humans and wild animals share the same spaces, danger cannot be totally eliminated. For instance, Czudek pointed to the danger facing people living in the same areas as crocodiles.

In Mozambique and Zimbabwe, he said, people do not take the proper precautions in bathing, washing clothes and collecting water.

"So there is this need to be aware, he said, "that there is a risk and you can put crocodile fencing around some areas where the people can go for collecting water, washing clothes, etc."

For baboons, who steal food, the Tool Kit suggests a live snake sandwich – hollowing out the center of a loaf of bread and putting a snake in it. “It’s quite a drastic method, but baboons have a very good memory. When they experience something like this, they don’t repeat it,” said Czudek. He added that the kit does offer other ways to deal with baboons.

The goal of the Tool Kit is harmonious co-habitation, Czudek said, protecting both humans and wildlife. He added that since “wildlife can be a valuable asset to humans,” human-wildlife conflict may one day become a human-wildlife alliance.

Seven S. African police killed in helicopter crash

(Alert Net)

23 July 2010

JOHANNESBURG, July 23 (Reuters) - Seven South African policemen including senior officers were killed in a helicopter crash on Friday about 130 km (80 miles) east of Johannesburg, a police spokesman said.

"The details are sketchy but it is believed the chopper crashed in an open field. The policemen are burnt beyond recognition," said Zweli Mnisi, the spokesman for the police minister Nathi Mthethwa.

Mnisi could not disclose the identities of the deceased, nor the destination of the helicopter.

Paramedics were searching fields adjacent the crash site in Witbank, in the country's northern province of Mpumalanga, for the remains of three of the seven occupants.

South Africa's police have been celebrated at home in recent weeks for their work in preventing any major incidents at the soccer World Cup, which ended earlier this month.

Calls for Political Parties to Field 50 Percent Female Candidates

(IPS)

22 July 2010

LUSAKA , Jul 22 (IPS) - With women having achieved little in terms of representation in decision-making positions in Zambia, a national women’s lobby group is hoping to change this in the 2011 general elections.

While Zambia's electoral process may have built-in obstacles that hinder the meaningful participation of women as candidates, the Zambia National Women’s Lobby Group (ZNWL) wants to change this through a campaign dubbed "50 percent of women and men in leadership for equitable development."

The lobby group is hoping to compel political parties to adopt 50 percent of women as candidates in the 2011 Parliamentary and local government elections.

The country ranks third last in the 14-member Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries in terms of women's representation with only 14 percent or 22 of out of 150 Parliamentary members being female. At local government level, women councillors are a paltry seven percent.

Zambia failed to attain the SADC Declaration on Gender to have 30 percent women representation in Parliament by 2005. It remains to be seen whether the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development committing countries to work towards having 50 percent women in political and decision-making positions by 2015 will be met, as there is currently no law compelling parties to do so.

But Sharon Chileshe, the capacity building and leadership development officer at ZNWL, is optimistic and says they have received very good feedback from the 14 political parties that they have engaged in through sensitisation workshops.

"We have all the necessary tools to catapult women into decision-making positions, we have asked political parties to identify women they want to field as candidates at various levels of leadership and send them to us for training," she says.

The training involves equipping women aspirants with leadership skills for the presidency, parliament and local government portfolios with researched information to help them enhance their decision-making.

But this may not be enough. A report released in 2008 by the Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF) on the 2006 general elections showing the low representation of women, suggests that Zambia's electoral regime has built-in obstacles that hinder the meaningful participation of women as candidates. Hence the need to adopt affirmative action, says Joyce Macmillan, WiLDAF chairperson. She says there are three main challenges facing women including limited resources to run campaigns, traditional stereotypes resulting in fewer educational qualifications, and the socialised perception that a woman's role should not be in the public domain.

And as the 50-50 campaign is doing now, WiLDAF had conducted capacity-building initiatives of empowering women to effectively contest the 2006 local government elections but still found women's participation unsatisfactory.

"Out of a total of 438 women trained to participate in the local government elections, 97 or 22 percent actually applied to be adopted as candidates by various political parties and only 57 women candidates, representing 13 percent, were adopted by various political parties," Macmillan points out. "There is need for constitutional provisions that will give women their due representation in decision-making positions."

The distribution of candidates by gender shows that only 106 out of the 709 parliamentary candidates were women. Further, only 27 of the 130 independent

parliamentary candidates were women. At local government level, out of the 4,095 candidates, only 387 won seats.

But Mirriam Munyinda of the Non-Governmental Organisation Co-ordinating Council (NGOCC), a grouping of women organisations, says government should put in place a legal framework and promote affirmative action to level the playing field.

In the last general elections, efforts to get more women in decision-making positions achieved very little as not only were the number of women candidates low, but also in certain cases, they were made to stand against each other at Parliamentary level.

But Charles Kakoma, opposition United Party for National Development (UPND) spokesperson says, without committing his party to having 50 percent women candidates, his party are in support of the women's lobby as long as the quality and ability to deliver are not compromised.

"We would like to have more women contesting the forthcoming elections. Selection will be very competitive and our women must have quality – they must meet the minimum education requirements, work experience, and by and large, organisational skills so they get to know how to mobilise people," Kakoma says.

He added that the prerogative of choosing candidates for the UPND remains with the party's national management committee.

During the International Women's Day commemorations in March, George Kunda, the country's vice president called on all political parties in the country to ensure that women are given more opportunities to participate as candidates in next year's general elections.

Kunda, who is also justice minister, says the National Constitutional Conference (NCC), which has been tasked to come-up with a new constitution that may possibly be used in next year's elections, is looking at submissions concerning equity and equality between men and women.

"It is my firm belief that through the NCC, we're laying a better foundation for enhancement of equal rights and opportunities for women and men," he says.

Still, in the absence of constitutional requirements, it is difficult to see how women will be able to reach the 50 percent representation in decision-making positions through next year's elections, even with the campaign by the women's lobby group.

After all, most political parties, in their manifestoes, have re-affirmed their commitment to gender equality, yet have all failed to reach the 30 percent SADC protocol on gender.

Food Security & Health Issues

Circumcision could halt 4 mln new African HIV cases

(Alert Net)

20 July 2010

VIENNA, July 20 (Reuters) - More than 4 million new HIV infections could be prevented in eastern and southern Africa by 2025 if male circumcision rates were increased to 80 percent, researchers said on Tuesday.

Expanding circumcision services to 80 percent of adult and newborn males in the region would also save \$20.2 billion in HIV-related health costs between 2009 and 2025, they said.

"With global resources spread thin, we must focus on expanding proven and cost-effective methods like male circumcision to prevent HIV transmission," Krishna Jafa, an HIV expert at health aid group Population Services International (PSI), said at an AIDS conference in Vienna.

Jafa's comments echoed former U.S. President Bill Clinton and philanthropist Bill Gates, who both used speeches to the conference to call for rapid scale-up of male circumcision as a cost-effective way to prevent the spread of HIV. [ID:nLDE66I0J3]

Sub-Saharan Africa carries the greatest burden of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes AIDS, accounting for 67 percent of the 33.4 million people living with the virus worldwide. An estimated 1.9 million people were newly infected with HIV in the region in 2008.

Research cited by the World Health Organisation has shown that male circumcision can reduce a man's risk of getting HIV by up to 60 percent.

PSI presented results of a study from Zimbabwe, where researchers designed and tried out an efficiency model called MOVE, aimed at increasing the numbers of male circumcisions by using better techniques, training, equipment and staff.

In a pilot of the new system, a team of two doctors and three nurses was able to carry out four circumcisions at the same time and increase their rate from three operations per hour to 10, the results showed. Over 12 months of the pilot, around 6,500 men were circumcised.

The findings also showed the quality of the procedure was not compromised and there were no increases in the percentage of men reporting bad side effects afterwards.

In March 2007, the WHO and United Nations UNAIDS group recommended male circumcision as an effective HIV prevention.

The PSI study found that in Zimbabwe alone, which has an adult HIV rate of 13.7 percent and a male circumcision rate of just over 10 percent, 750,000 new HIV infections could be prevented if 80 percent of men were to be circumcised. It also found there was high demand for the procedure.

Bill Gates, whose Gates Foundation spends much of its \$34 billion fund on fighting HIV, told the AIDS conference on Monday he had been surprised by the number of men in Africa who wanted to be circumcised to reduce their risk of contracting HIV.

"I was doubtful that a large number of men would sign up for it. I'm glad to say I was wrong," he said. "Wherever there are clinics available, men are volunteering to be circumcised in huge numbers -- far more than I expected."

But Gates said while more than 41 million men in sub-Saharan Africa could benefit from it, only 150,000 have been circumcised in the past few years.

S. Africa eager to see speedy roll-out of AIDS gel

(Alert Net)

20 July 2010

VIENNA, July 20 (Reuters) - South Africa is considering rolling out use of a vaginal gel which can protect women against HIV during sex before it is officially licensed by drug regulators, the country's health minister said on Tuesday.

Speaking at an international AIDS conference in Vienna, Aaron Motsoaledi said the need was so great for effective HIV prevention measures in his country -- where 1,000 people die from AIDS-related illnesses each day -- that his ministry was keen to act on early evidence of the gel's success.

"We are very interested in it. We believe in an evidence-based approach and if scientists say this thing is going to work, then we will definitely be looking at it," Motsoaledi told Reuters when asked if his government was planning to move ahead with the gel before it is licensed.

"So far, evidence is showing that it is ... very promising."

Researchers said on Monday that the gel, which is known as a microbicide and contains a prescription drug from U.S. drugmaker Gilead Sciences <GILD.O>, can sharply reduce HIV infections in women who use it before and after sex. [ID:nN19129341]

The findings caused great excitement among the 20,000 scientists, activists and HIV positive people gathered for a biennial international conference on AIDS in Vienna.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations AIDS group UNAIDS described the trial as ground-breaking and WHO director Margaret Chan said she would work to speed up access to the product if further results show it is safe and effective.

While there is no actual product available yet, researchers who led the study, which was funded by the South African government and USAID, said making the gel and the applicators needed to apply it is likely to be relatively cheap and easy.

Anthony Fauci, of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, one of the world's most respected scientific experts on HIV, said countries with the greatest need should be able to move forward with using new HIV/AIDS medicines without having to wait for regulators such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to license them.

He also said he could see no reason why the U.S. Presidential AIDS campaign fund, PEPFAR, would not be free to decide to pay for such a gel for the use in developing countries even before it gets approval from drugs regulators.

"Judgments will have to be made by individual nations based on their need for such an approach as to how they will use the (trial) data to utilise the product," he told a reporters.

"And I don't necessarily think that there has to be a direct link between something that is approved by the FDA and something that PEPFAR will pay for."

Results of the South African trial, which involved 889 women, showed the gel reduced HIV infections in women by 39 percent over two and a half years -- the first time such an approach has protected against sexual transmission of the virus.

Researchers are already working on another trial larger which will involve 5,000 women in South Africa, Malawi, Uganda and Zimbabwe, to further test the gel's safety and efficacy.

Refugees/IDPs & Migration

Army sent to S. Africa Township after migrants attacked

(Alert Net)

20 July 2010

JOHANNESBURG, July 20 (Reuters) - South Africa's military joined police on Tuesday to patrol an impoverished Johannesburg township after assaults on foreign migrants injured at least 11 and increased concerns of a fresh wave of xenophobic attacks.

Police said the injured at the Kya Sands township included migrants from Zimbabwe and Mozambique as well as South Africans. At least 10 people have been arrested on suspicion of assault.

A series of attacks on foreign workers in 2008 killed 62 people and damaged investors' confidence. Another wave could wreck the positive image that Africa's biggest economy was able to portray when it hosted the soccer World Cup. [ID:nLDE66E177]

"We are keeping a close eye on the situation," a police official said.

The military have joined about 100 security personnel deployed in the township and about 50 police were on standby, Talk Radio 702 reported from the area. Police and military officials would not confirm the reports.

Tensions have long been growing between South Africans and millions of foreign migrants they accuse of taking jobs and homes. But open animosity appeared to be put on hold during the World Cup as South Africa showed its best face to the world.

Many migrants feared a rapid dissipation of feelings of African unity generated by the first World Cup held on the continent. Many have fled to homes in neighbouring states since the tournament ended earlier this month.

Running battles erupted late on Monday at Kya Sands after a robbery in the township provoked anger between local people and foreigners, the local Eye Witness News website said. Police took several hours to quell the unrest.

Eye Witness News said two men had deep cuts to their heads. One said he had been attacked with an axe. A woman was carried out on her husband's back, saying she had failed to outrun a mob and had been kicked in the chest.

Foreign migrants are estimated to make up more than 10 percent of South Africa's population of about 49 million. Many are Zimbabweans who fled economic collapse at home.

Government officials have mostly dismissed the fears of a fresh wave of attacks on foreign migrants as being fuelled by rumours and not by actual violence.

South Africa's alarmingly high crime rate makes it difficult to classify the motive for attacks on migrants. The poor from South Africa and abroad fall victim to violence daily in the state where murders average 50 per day.

China-Africa Relations

AU says must replace Western partners with China

(Reuters)

24 July 2010

(Reuters) - The African Union said on Saturday Africa must turn ever more to China for its development because conditions and checks often stalled the flow of funds from Western nations and the World Bank.

Maxwell Mkwezalamba, the AU's economic chief, said Africa must end its reliance on Western money.

"For Africa's development and integration we have depended on the Western world -- we cannot continue to proceed like this," Mkwezalamba told reporters.

"We need to diversify our partners that we work with and hence for us, working with China is something that we have welcomed," he said at the AU summit in Uganda.

China pledged last year to give Africa \$10 billion in concessional loans over the next three years and it is pouring money into developing infrastructure in many nations on the world's poorest continent.

Some Western nations say China is interested only in extracting Africa's natural resources to feed its fast-growing economy, cares little for African development and supports governments with dubious human rights records.

Rights groups say China, which last year imported \$6.3 billion of Sudanese crude oil, has failed to do enough to stop bloodshed in Sudan's strife-torn Darfur and has violated a U.N. arms embargo on the region.

China denies the charges and has appointed its own envoy to try to bring peace to Darfur. China's Foreign Ministry says critics who suggest China is only interested in Africa because of its energy resources are "erroneous and one-sided."

Mkwezalamba said restrictive conditions placed on loans by some of its traditional Western partners and groups such as the World Bank was driving African nations into the arms of China. He did not specify the restrictive conditions.

"By getting support from China and other countries we strengthen our position in dealing with institutions such as the World Bank, which tend to impose huge conditions," he said. "The resources tend to come very slowly."

"They tell you that you are going to get \$100 million today but then you don't get the \$100 million until after maybe two years because the whole question of processing the loan takes a long time," he said.

Mkwezalamba said Africa's increasing outreach to China in place of traditional development partners would create friction.

"We know that there could be some difficulties that some financial institutions and development institutions may have with some of these partners (like China), but for Africa I think this is the way to go," he said.

Some Chinese commentators say the West still treats Africa like a colony, whereas Beijing's interest is based on mutual economic development.

Peace keeping conflict resolution and security analysis

ANGOLA: Cabindan separatists in exile deny end to conflict

(IRIN)

22 July 2010

PARIS, 22 July 2010 (IRIN) - Offers of peace by senior officials of the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC), which seemingly ended a long-standing separatist conflict in northern Angola, were made without the knowledge or consent of its president, Henrique N'Zita Tiago, and exiled leaders in France describe the olive branch as a "coup d'état".

"We did not sign any ceasefire with the Angolans," said Tiago, leader of FLEC-FAC (Armed Forces of Cabinda), now in exile in the French capital, Paris. He told IRIN that in recent years all correspondence from him to the Angolan government and its President, Eduardo Dos Santos, offering to engage in peace negotiations had always been ignored.

"The answer to the letters seeking peaceful negotiations has always been sending more troops to Cabinda to kill Cabindans," he said.

Long-standing dispute

Cabinda, which is separated from Angola's main territory by the Congo River and a narrow wedge of the Democratic Republic of Congo, provides around 60 percent of the oil production that makes Angola the largest producer in Africa. Cabinda's mineral wealth also includes gold, diamonds and uranium, as well as extensive reserves of tropical hardwoods.

Tiago's claim to Cabindan independence is based on the different colonial histories of Angola and the disputed enclave. Angola was a Portuguese colony for hundreds of years, while Cabinda became a Portuguese Protectorate in 1885 under the Treaty of Simulambuco, which provided protection to the Cabindan kingdoms of N'Goyo, Kacongo, and Loango from the colonial ambitions of Belgium, Britain and France.

Portuguese dictator António de Oliveira Salazar declared Angola a province of Portugal in the 1930s and Cabinda was brought under the same administration. Those favouring independence for Cabinda claim Angola's first government annexed it at independence in 1975.

The ruling MPLA government views Cabinda as a province of Angola and has dismissed the argument of cultural differences as "not enough to grant it [Cabinda] independence, because all the provinces in the country have specific cultures".

Recent manoeuvres

The Cabindan Forum for Dialogue (FCD), formed in 2004 in the Netherlands, included representatives of all the FLEC factions, Cabindan civil society and church groupings.

In 2006 Antonio Bento Bembe - then president of the FCD - signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which, at least on paper, brought an end to Cabinda's separatist ambitions.

In 2005, while in the Netherlands, Bento Bembe was arrested on an international warrant for the kidnapping of an oil company employee 15 years earlier while he was a FLEC combatant, but he was given parole through the use of an Angolan diplomatic passport and returned to Luanda.

Bento Bembe, recently appointed Angola's first minister of human rights in the ruling MPLA government, told IRIN during a recent interview in the Angolan capital, Luanda, that Tiago "dreams of a glorious military victory, but he is a sick old man on his deathbed in Paris, and when he dies, so will his cause".

Bento Bembe was a former FLEC combatant and secretary-general of the splinter group FLEC Renovada, but dismissed any suggestion that the separatist movement to which he dedicated 30 years of his life still existed, apart from "in the mind" of Tiago.

State of denial

FLEC's exiled Secretary General, Joel Batila, dismissed Bento Bembe's MOU, and offers of peace by a group of senior FLEC office-holders, as "a coup d'etat organised by Angola".

Batila said FLEC's chief of staff, Stanislas Boma, vice president Alexandre Tati, security chief Carlos Luembe, and foreign affairs minister Luis Veras recently visited Luanda without the authority of the movement's president, and subsequently declared the armed struggle of more than 35 years at an end. He said the four senior officials were no longer regarded as office-holders of FLEC.

Tiago added that Bento Bembe did not have the authority to make a peace agreement, and his organization refused to accept its terms, as FLEC's primary demand and reason for existing was the independence of Cabinda.

The MOU, among other things, provided an amnesty for all combatants, an immediate ceasefire, the reduction of Angolan troop numbers in the province, and the recognition that Cabinda and Angola were "a united and indivisible nation".

Tiago suggested that the four senior officials had accepted bribes for acceding to the demands of the Angolan government. "Now what they [Angolan government] are doing is divide and rule, corrupting those people in their favour and paying them money. It is not going to help the problem of Cabinda," he said.

Not over just yet

"Angola has been using all the tricks, and when there is unity [in FLEC] they will pay some Cabindans to break down that unity. Bento Bembe is not accepted by Cabindans - they see him as betraying the case of Cabindans. We want real negotiations in the presence of the international community. Angola has to accept to negotiate with Cabindans, and FLEC is ready to negotiate with Angolans," N'Zita Tiago said.

"I think we have to start negotiations to end the war, but these negotiations have to be held in the presence of international observers, such as the African Union, European Union and United Nations," he proposed.

"Why not ask the people, 'What do you want?' That will be easier than dividing people and sending troops into Cabinda. In East Timor there was a referendum and people voted; in Kosovo there was a referendum, and next year in south Sudan they are asking people to talk," Tiago said. "Why cannot Cabindans be given such an opportunity?"

Bento Bembe recently told international media: "if FLEC leaders say they want to talk with the government, we say we are open to that."