

Vigil Highlights 2009

Written by Administrator

Sunday, 22 January 2012 13:54 - Last Updated Sunday, 22 January 2012 13:54

Zimbabwe Vigil Highlights 2009

Monday 12th January: From our Press Release: "A leading Zimbabwean political activist in the UK campaigning for human rights in Zimbabwe has been taken into detention and told he is to be deported. Luka Phiri was helping organise a demonstration in London for Tuesday 13th January calling for Zimbabwean failed asylum seekers to be allowed to work in the UK. Phiri is on the management team of the Zimbabwe Vigil. He is also a leading member of the Zimbabwe Association, a charity looking after Zimbabwean asylum seekers in the UK. Phiri entered the UK in 2003 on a Malawian passport and it is apparently for this reason that the Home Office wishes to expel him. Vigil Co-ordinator Rose Benton said "There is no doubt that Luka is a Zimbabwean but the Home Office wants to send him back to Malawi, a firm supporter of Mugabe. Malawi will send him on to Harare where he will face retribution from the Mugabe regime."

Tuesday 13th January: Vigil supporters joined Citizens for Sanctuary in their demonstration for Zimbabwean failed asylum seekers to be allowed to work. A dossier of CVs

collected from Zimbabweans in the UK who have skills that are going to waste was delivered to Downing Street.

Saturday 24th January: We phoned Luka who is still in detention in Dover. The phone was passed to Jenatry at the centre of the Vigil who led a song for him. The phone was then passed around to many of his friends so he could talk to them all. Apparently the Archbishop of York's Office contacted the Zimbabwe Association and wrote to Phil Woolas, MP, Minister of State (Borders & Immigration) Home Office, on behalf of Luka. Luka's bail hearing is on Wednesday and we hope he will be released then.

Saturday 31st January: The Vigil bought a cake to celebrate the return of Luka who was released this week. He joked that at least he was warmer in detention. Luka said he was deeply touched at the support he had received from the Zimbabwean community at large. Patson introduced the dance troupe 'Umbane' who, despite the icy weather, donned traditional tribal costumes and entranced us with their close harmony Zimbabwean songs and athletic dances.

Saturday 14th February: 'Free Roy Bennett' (and other political prisoners) was the theme of the Vigil. Roy was one of the people who inspired the launch of the Vigil back in 2002 and visited us when he was last released from prison, when we clothed him and Heather in our Vigil t-shirts. 'If they can arrest Bennett, they can arrest any of us if we return' said Patson Muzuwa of the Vigil management team.

Saturday 21st February: A big crowd turned out for our mock 85th birthday celebrations for Mugabe. The Vigil worked on the basis of a report in the Times saying that Mugabe's party organisers had ordered 8,000 lobsters and 4,000 portions of caviar to be washed down by 2,000 bottles of champagne and 500 bottles of whisky. We had Vigil management team member Fungayi Mabhunu wearing our Mugabe mask and waving a Methuselah of champagne. He stood in the doorway of the Embassy with his consort Grumpy Grace (brilliantly played by Emily Gurupira), dripping with diamonds and perched on designer shoes as she scowled at the TV cameramen covering the Vigil. Afterwards she headed off to Harrods to do some shopping armed with a fat cheque from the UN.

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Supporters held up posters saying 'Mugabe spends US\$200,000 dollars while his people starve' and 'Zimbabwean life expectancy: men 37, women 34, Mugabe 85+'.

Saturday 7th March: Some wearing black bandanas or armbands, Vigil supporters mourned the death of Susan Tsvangirai in Friday's road crash. Carrying placards saying "The Vigil mourns with Tsvangirai" and "More death in Zimbabwe", we expressed our shock at the death of a much admired lady. We were at a loss to understand how this could be an accident. There was an electric feeling of outrage, suspicion and anger.

The feelings were summed up by two big banners brought to the Vigil: "Sleeping with the enemy one was bound to be bludgeoned to death in one's sleep. Mugabe is a murderer" and "The plot thickens in Zimbabwe. An attempt on Tsvangirai's life and he loses his wife in a highly suspicious road accident".

Wednesday 11th March: Several Vigil supporters attended a meeting chaired by Kate Hoey MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Zimbabwe, at Westminster. The speaker was Thabitha Khumalo, MDC-T MP for the Bulawayo constituency Mkokoba. She talked about how she and her constituents were trying to repair damage: filling in potholes, unblocking sewers.

She had gone into a sewer, braving the unbelievable stench, to try and unblock it. She was more successful than she expected and was suddenly drenched by a fountain of sewage! She had to travel 5 kilometres to find water to bathe in.

Friday 20th March: Fungayi Mabhunu spoke about conditions in Zimbabwe during a visit to the Dolphin School in Battersea, south London, at the invitation of teacher Steve Garvey who had visited the Vigil. The Year 4s have decided to take part in a sponsored event next month with all the proceeds going directly to one or two schools in Zimbabwe who desperately need it. The Year 4 teacher Mr Garvey has also decided to raise money by running the London Marathon next month on behalf of the Vigil.

Saturday 18th April: There was considerable media interest in our Independence Day protest about the conditions in Zimbabwean prisons. Public attention was grabbed by graphic pictures of starving prisoners and bodies piled high in Mugabe's hell-holes. Many passers-by stopped to add their names to a special petition to SADC: "A petition to Zimbabwe's neighbours: We call upon the Southern African Development Community – as guarantors of the Zimbabwe power-sharing agreement – to put pressure on the new Zimbabwean government of national unity to stop the blatant abuse of human rights of prisoners in Zimbabwe who are dying of starvation, disease and torture." Our protest was given added urgency by a report that cholera has begun to spread in prison. Patson Muzuwa explained the Vigil's demand that the prison population be reduced to a level where those incarcerated could be properly fed and housed. Otherwise we were looking at a genocide. Patson, who has been imprisoned several times for his activism, described the abuses of a gulag system in which innocent people could be completely lost to the outside world. (Some months later the Zimbabwe government agreed to our demand for an amnesty.)

Sunday 26th April: Steve Garvey, teacher at the Dolphin School, Battersea, ran the London Marathon to raise money on behalf of the Vigil.

Saturday 23rd May: At a Vigil forum after the Vigil, supporters discussed our way forward. The overwhelming message was: we will continue until there is real change.

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Saturday 6th June: The Vigil gave a great pom pom to a man who ran 26.2 miles for us. He is Steve Garvey who ran the London Marathon in 3 hours 26 minutes to raise funds for the Vigil. Steve came to the Vigil some months ago with some of his pupils (8 – 9 year olds). Steve invited the Vigil to send someone to speak to his class and Fungayi Mabhunu took up the challenge. He spoke of the conditions in Zimbabwe and the struggles of school children there. The response was a fundraising effort which is set to raise £1100.

Saturday 13th June: There was talk that Tsvangirai would be accompanied to the UK by two Zanu-PF ministers, Foreign Minister Simbarashe Mumbengengwi and the Minister of Mines Obert Mpfu. Both of them are on the targeted sanctions list and the Vigil approached the Foreign Office to protest at granting visas to these two Mugabe cronies. The Vigil has been assured that Mr Mpfu will not be part of the delegation. Our assumption is that Mumbengengwi will be allowed in under a dispensation allowing for 'dialogue'.

The Vigil does not accept the case for relaxing targeted sanctions against Mumbengengwi. But we think he makes a better companion for the Prime Minister than Tsvangirai's niece Dr Arikana Chihombori who accompanied him to the inauguration of President Zuma.

As you may know she is an American citizen and has a large medical practice in the US where she has lived for 30 years. Nevertheless, she has seen fit to try to dispossess a Zimbabwean farmer for her holiday home.

Saturday 20th June: An extraordinary day which saw Morgan Tsvangirai stomping out of a diaspora assembly in Southwark Cathedral in south London when his speech was booed. The Vigil was there to greet his convoy when it arrived. Displaying our banners 'No to Mugabe, No to Starvation' and 'End Murder, Rape and Torture in Zimbabwe', we danced and drummed and sang 'To save Zimbabwe, Mugabe must go'. The Prime Minister could not have failed to see our posters 'Protect Human Rights Activists', 'Restore the Rule of Law' and 'End Farm Invasions'. Our purpose was to welcome Tsvangirai but also to remind him of what people in the diaspora think needs to be done if Zimbabwe is to win the confidence of donors and investors and be a welcoming place for returning exiles.

Tsvangirai was given a big ovation when he emerged in the cathedral after prayers and a reading from the Acts of the Apostles by Vigil management team member Gugu Tutani – 'I have surely seen the mistreatment of my people'. But he was jeered by the audience when he called on them to return home.

As far as they were concerned he was telling them to go back to a place with no jobs or rule of law and continuing human rights abuses.

There were chants of 'Mugabe must go'. The much-heralded meeting ended abruptly

Despite this distraction, the Vigil outside the Embassy took place as normal. We were not surprised that Tsvangirai did not stop by on his way to a £75 a head dinner for exiled Zimbabweans.

Saturday 27th June: Vigil supporters were fired up about silly allegations on some loud-mouthed Zimbabwean exile websites that the Vigil and ROHR were behind the booing of Morgan Tsvangirai when he spoke to the UK diaspora in Southwark Cathedral last week.

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Anyone looking at videos of the occasion will see that the angry response was prompted by Mr Tsvangirai's remarks and was spontaneous and could not possibly have been planned. The meeting's organizers, the MDC UK Executive (since suspended pending corruption investigations), also sought to blame asylum seekers, accusing them of being selfish and not being up to date with the situation on the ground in Zimbabwe – the “progress” that has been made. Well, frankly, with the abundant access to information that we have in the UK we sometimes feel that we have to tell people at home what is going on – that, for instance, the MDC Deputy Minister for Mines, **Murisi Zwizwai**, seems to have been co-opted by Zanu-PF in claiming that there is no evidence of killings in the Marange diamond fields. **The Vigil was**

followed by a well-attended Forum at which the role of the Vigil and ROHR was discussed.

Saturday 25th July: The Vigil gathered in the middle of three days of National Hypocrisy. The so-called ‘healing’ exercise announced by Mugabe failed to convince our supporters that he has any intention of reining in his thugs or allowing the rule of law. Our supporters wanted to know when there will be justice for the oppressed and an acknowledgement of the evil perpetrated by Zanu PF. As one supporter (Brian Sibanda) said ‘what happens on day 4 . . . back to torture?’ He was questioning Ephraim Tapa, President of our partner organisation Restoration of Human Rights in Zimbabwe (ROHR), who told the Vigil that 15 ROHR members had been arrested in Harare today during a demonstration against Mugabe's hypocrisy.

After the Vigil we had a Forum at which there was a wide-ranging discussion covering the situation in Zimbabwe and the difficulties faced by Zimbabweans in the UK.

Saturday 15th August: A spectacular performance by our friends the Afro Drum Generation was the highlight of the Vigil. Dressed in traditional animal skins, their high-stepping dancing, supported by marimba and drums, entranced many passers-by. The group hopes to take part in **Zim Idol**, a TV talent contest to discover Zimbabwe's music stars of tomorrow.

Saturday 22nd August: An alarming picture of life under the ‘unity’ government has emerged in the wake of a mention in the Vigil diary about ‘people's poet’ Brian Sibanda. We reported how he had brought along a banner expressing skepticism about the ‘3 days of national healing’. His take was ‘3 days peace. On day 4 bullet sent via post’ – a reference to the bullet sent to Tendai Biti. **Brian says that within days of our report (accompanied by a picture of him) appearing in the Zimbabwean, his family home in Zimbabwe was raided by 3 policemen. They compared photographs of him there with his picture in the newspaper and spoke angrily about Zimbabweans in the UK. Today we launched**

a new petition aimed at the SADC meeting in Kinshasha next month which is due to review the Global Political Agreement: ‘A petition to Zimbabwe's neighbours: We call upon the Southern African Development Community – as guarantors of the Zimbabwe power-sharing government – to put pressure on President Mugabe to honour the agreement.

More than six months into the unity government, Mugabe is still resisting a return to the rule of law, deterring essential foreign development aid and investment.’

Saturday 26th September: A triumphant cheer with exuberant ululating greeted two members of the Vigil management team, Dumi Tutani and Luka Phiri, when they arrived at the Vigil after completing a 55-mile sponsored walk from Brighton on the south coast. Despite their

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exhaustion, they immediately joined in the celebratory dancing.

The

walk was to raise funds to

help a Zimbabwean girl with a severe facial tumour who is coming to the UK for urgent medical treatment. The girl, Taremeredzwa Nomatter Mapungwana, is supported by the Zimbabwean charity Girl Child Network. Dumi and Luka were greeted at the Vigil by Betty Makoni, founder of Girl Child Network, who was warm in her praise. "Because of your walk people here have now heard of our work". Betty addressed the Vigil about her experience as an activist on women's issues. She said she had been forced to flee Zimbabwe because of her role in helping women victims of political violence.

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Betty said rape had been used as a weapon of war since 2002 and women and their families were still being harassed and intimidated. Husbands would be taunted by the perpetrators, who believed they could act with impunity

Zimbabwe Vigil's 7th Anniversary, Saturday 10th October: President Mugabe and first lady 'Shopwell' Grace were not at all happy with their Harrods experience. Two members of the Vigil (Fungayi Mabhunu and Gugu Tutani) impersonating the presidential couple went to this puffed-up shop to illustrate what will happen if the targeted sanctions against Mugabe and his cronies are lifted as demanded by Zimbabwe's neighbours. After learning about our proposed shopping spree, a pompous Harrods PR flunky phoned us and threatened to put Attorney-General Tomana on our case. 'You can't come in', she said. 'Can we take pictures outside?' we asked. 'No it's out of the question' Harrods replied, sensitive as always to the susceptibilities of their kleptocratic clients.

Well, despite Harrods' hoity-toity response, Mugabe and Shopwell marched boldly into the bazaar.

One of Zimbabwe's celebrated 15-digit bank notes was given to Geoffrey Van Orden, Member of the European Parliament for Eastern England, who came to the Vigil to support us on our 7th

anniversary. Mr Van Orden accepted our petition to hand over to the European Union calling for punitive action against SADC because of its failure to honour its commitment to ensure that the global political agreement is implemented. The petition was handed to him by President Mugabe who arrived with Shopwell by rickshaw after their Harrods expedition.

Saturday 14th November: The Vigil's petition to the EU calling for punitive action against SADC countries was presented in Brussels this week to the EU's Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Karel De Gucht. It was handed over by Geoffrey Van Orden who received it at a ceremony last month to mark the Vigil's seventh anniversary.

Wednesday 25th November: Vigil supporters attended a meeting in London attended by Jenni Williams and Magodonga Mahlangu of WOZA, fresh from their wonderful reception by President Obama in Washington. Our supporters reported there was deep concern about the human rights situation in rural Zimbabwe. There was criticism that the MDC were not reaching these areas.

Saturday 28th November: The Vigil is not surprised that the MDC UK and Ireland Province has been suspended by the party's leadership in Harare. A letter from MDC Secretary General

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Tendai Biti spoke of financial irregularities, poor performance and 'dysfunctionality'. The Vigil could add many other reasons. Since former Assistant Police Commissioner Jonathan Chawora was foisted on the membership going on 2 years ago, the MDC in the UK has gone steadily downhill. All its efforts have gone into fundraising but it seems Harare has seen none of the funds. Where has the money gone? The Vigil has a good idea. Well, the party leaders in Harare are to send an investigating committee to find out.

The Vigil can tell the committee that the disgraced UK Executive has done nothing to publicise the plight of Zimbabwe or promote the party to the British public. Instead it has devoted its energy to trying to undermine the Vigil – sometimes with veiled threats of violence. Gertrude Hambara, General Secretary of the General Agricultural and Plant Workers Union of Zimbabwe dropped in at the Vigil. Earlier in the week she had addressed the All-Party Parliamentary Committee on Zimbabwe and said the MDC needed to move into rural communities before they became 'no-go areas'.

Tuesday 15th December: Vigil supporters spoke to Ben Freeth at a private screening at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of a documentary about his persecution 'Mugabe and the White African'. He also expressed thanks to the Vigil for our work in continuing to expose the absence of the rule of law in Zimbabwe. This award-winning film will be shown all over the world and will do much to puncture the Zanu-MDC propaganda that things are returning to normal in Zimbabwe.

Friday 18th December: Several Vigil members attended a meeting addressed by Jestina Mukoko. She expressed gratitude to the Vigil for our support when she was in prison being tortured and spoke of 'unsung heroes'. Jestina warned that the Mugabe regime had learned nothing from her case and were continuing to perpetrate atrocities.