

Freedom Bus

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 26 February 2003 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 31 October 2008 13:58

A sunny early Spring day and an open-top red London bus, festooned with Zimbabwean flags, banners and posters denouncing murder, torture and rape under the Mugabe regime; it was a heady combination and with the top deck crowded with singers and drummers, it certainly turned many heads as it drove around central London for five hours on Wednesday, 26 February. The occasion was the delivery of a petition calling on the UN Security Council to send a team to investigate human rights abuses in Zimbabwe. The petition was signed by close on 16,000 passers-by who stopped to support the protest vigil outside the Zimbabwe High Commission, held every Saturday from 12.00 to 18.00 since last October. 16,000 signatures may not sound a lot compared to some widely-distributed petitions – but it meant a person signing every twenty seconds or so during the vigils.

About 60 of us – including supporters from Scotland, Bedfordshire, Coventry, Hertfordshire and Southend – set off raucously from the High Commission on our bus tour with much blowing of whistles and banging of drums. First stop was the House of Commons to present a copy of the petition to Clare Short, Secretary of State for International Development, who – together with a number of other MPs from both the main parties – had agreed to receive us in the historic lobby of the House, despite an important debate that day on Iraq.

Ms Short paid rapt attention to Ephraim Tapa, chairman of MDC UK's Central London Branch, who handed over the petition on behalf of a group of six torture survivors. Mr Tapa told her, "There is no argument, no history, no post-colonial baggage, no politics or rhetoric that can explain or justify what has happened to myself and my compatriots here today. There are countless more in Zimbabwe who have not had the good fortune to escape from Mugabe's reach, who live and die in fear and humiliation every day." Mr Tapa pointed out that more than 3 million Zimbabweans have been forced into exile by deliberate starvation, state-sanctioned violence, murder, torture and rape – all to maintain Mugabe's political power. He added that support for the Zanu-PF regime by some members of the non-aligned movement and the Commonwealth was utterly disgusting and misguided.

In her reply, Ms Short promised to do all in her power to work for change in Zimbabwe and said she was confident that this would come soon. But, beyond these words, it was the interest and concern that she showed that impressed the 40 or so Zimbabweans who had left the bus to deliver the petition. She spoke privately to the torture survivors, putting her arm around one young woman who recounted her story, and the meeting went on for much longer than scheduled.

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After this it was light relief to rejoin the bus for a riotous journey through central London and down Oxford Street, packed as usual with shoppers from all over the world. By now our bus driver was no longer the anxious man he had been at the start: he had come to realise that all the hooting behind him was because of a poster on the back of the bus "Toot to stop Mugabe". As the bus made its slow way down Oxford Street surprised drivers and even cyclists had flyers thrust at them. Pedestrians smiled and waved – some of them risking life and limb to grab a flyer. One fellow looking very disapproving demanded who was in charge – only to hand over a £20 note. Down Park Lane we got a friendly wave from the world champion boxer Chris Eubank as he left an hotel.

On to the UN office at Millbank Tower, where people crowded to the windows to see the singing, dancing and drumming as we waited to present the petition. A UN representative, George Armstrong, told us the UN was aware of the urgency of the situation and promised the petition would be given high priority. Back to the bus and on to the Commonwealth Secretariat and then the South African High Commission, where demonstrators sang a rousing song demanding that President Mbeki do something about Zimbabwe. The High Commission staff seemed nonplussed – but visitors in Trafalgar Square were fascinated by the singing and dancing. Copies of the petition were also delivered to the Nigerian High Commission, to the office of the European Parliament and to the French Embassy. But, predictably, we were stonewalled at Zimbabwe House. Put it in the letterbox said the security man. A quick check established there was no letterbox. Well, the message had already been delivered!

[Pictures here.](#)