

A Day in Paris

Written by Administrator

Friday, 21 February 2003 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 31 October 2008 12:56



Sitting in a police holding cell in Paris, I write. 11 of us detained. For peacefully protesting, for calling for the arrest of Mugabe for torture, for trying to make the world aware of our anger at Chirac allowing this banned dictator into France, flouting the EU's travel ban.

With only a few hours sleep behind us, we had arrived early in Paris and headed to the Ministry of Justice where we joined forces with members of Act Up and the Pink Panthers, gay activists who share our anger at Mugabe's presence in France. Our protest was broken up by the police who arrived quickly and outnumbered us completely. But not before our chants and shouts had been caught on camera by the international press.



From there, we had walked through Paris to the Magistrate's Court, the French among us warning us not to wave banners while walking for fear of arrest. We were there to serve papers prepared by Peter Tatchell giving grounds for the arrest of Mugabe. Our attempts to protest were foiled by armed police, who, repressively circling, told us to disband. We couldn't protest, no chanting of slogans, no waving of banners. Peter and Tom Spicer, an 18 year old victim of torture at the hands of the Mugabe regime, served the papers, as no more than two were allowed inside.

We regrouped down the road. and sat in a café and waited, eating lunch and strategising our next move. Should we go to the Zimbabwean Embassy or to the hotel where we had been tipped (by the press who were eating their lunch at adjoining tables, waiting to see what we were going to do next) that Mugabe was staying? Tom and Peter arrived, energised slightly by the response they had been given. things seemed positive, somehow.

We decided to wait until four before meeting Peter outside the hotel. He left, to organise the press and ensure any of our efforts would be filmed. So we caught the metro to the Champs D'Eysses, a swift walk up towards the Arc d'Triomphe, and right to the Zimbabwe Embassy, to spend the intervening hours supporting Act Up in their protest. They threw condoms filled with dramatic-red liquid at the walls and then themselves down onto the road, to stop the police who were were gathering in

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force, from dragging them away. 'Mugabe, arrete,' their angry defiant cries reached us as we approached. Joining their protest on the periphery, aware that if we were arrested now we would not make our 4 o'clock rendezvous outside the hotel. We fell back as they were dragged away, the press filming their distress and rough handling at the hands of the police.

From there back down the Champs D'Elysses, and into the road on which Mugabe's chosen hotel stood. A road lined with shops, filled with designer goods – Gucci, Prada - , the price of which the average Zimbabwean could hardly dream of, but its first lady routinely wears. Outside the hotel, the press had gathered, at the ready. We waited there for Peter. But our arranged time passed, and we could see the press getting restless, nothing happening, nothing to report. So we made our move. Rushed forwards, shouting and waving our banners. Yelled until we were hoarse. 'Arrest Mugabe, arrest Mugabe for torture.' 'Arrest Mugabe, arrest Mugabe for torture.' 'Chinja, Maitiro.' 'Murderer, Murderer'. 'Mugabe must go.' 'Arrest Mugabe, Save Zimbabwe.'

The media's cameras trained on us. The police circling, jostling us, ripping the flags we carried and the banners from our hands. Slowly we were pushed further and further from the hotel entrance. Again more police than protesters, not asked to disband but slyly rounded up behind barriers, enclosed in a makeshift cage. Still we shouted, arousing the curiosity of passers by. And then a police bus arrived and one by one we were escorted onto it. To be taken where, we did not know. None of the police would tell us: 'just to take your identity'. We pushed our faces against the clear sections of the window, past the press and Peter Tatchell who must have arrived as we were being rounded up.

And then, a winding sired journey (reminiscent of Mugabe's passing through the streets of Harare – a high speed motorcade) past the Eiffel Tower, up the Champs D'Elysses and by the Arc d'Triomphe, and into a suburb none of us knew. A tour of Paris unexpected. We were surprisingly jubilant. Messages came through on our phones from London, from South Africa, from Ghana and from Harare. We were on Sky, the BBC; the news had gone around the world. We had been seen.



Herded then, out of the bus, and into a holding cell where first our cameras were taken, then our mobile phones, and then our bags. Telling us nothing of how long we

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would be held, what would happen.

And here I sit now. Arrived at 5.20 pm. In this cell, 6 by 12 feet, glass panelled on the one side so all our movements are monitored. My writing is covertly undertaken as all pens were confiscated along with everything else. We pass round the bombay mix, padkos for a journey we never knew we'd take.

Three of us have been taken out for interviews, they went at five to seven. Unsure of what will happen. We must be on the plane back to London by twenty to ten and between then and now we must still navigate our way through Paris, a city we hardly know.

We were finally released after 8 o'clock, the policewoman on duty taking all our details and a group statement. She seemed embarrassed by our being detained. Our possessions were returned but not our flags and banners, 'must be destroyed' we were told, much to our disbelief. And then it was a mad rush to get to the airport, a combination of metro and taxi getting us there just in time. On board we had champagne and each of us gave a toast 'To the next time' 'To change at home' 'To the end of a brutal regime'.

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