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Africa must act on Zimbabwe's disaster

By Michael Holman and Greg Mills

Something is stirring in Africa. Belatedly, often reluctantly, its leaders are speaking out on Zimbabwe. The rogue president in their ranks, they are coming to realise, poses a threat with the potential to destabilise their fragile continent, already caught in a growing storm.

Even though annual economic growth remains above 5 per cent, food prices are rising, transport costs soaring and, while commodity prices rise, oil bonanzas are squandered. So-called role models collapse and terrorism lurks in failed states. Aids and malaria continue to decimate, corruption destroys and inefficient management debilitates.

The causes are complex, the faults not exclusively Africa's. Yet far from rising to the challenges, the region's leaders have seemed incapable of the co-ordinated response the crisis needs.

But change may be under way. In Rwanda, President Paul Kagame is among the first to raise his head above the parapet, joining Botswana's Ian Khama and Zambia's Levy Mwanawasa in a growing band of African leaders who are prepared to condemn a tyrant. Not only has Robert Mugabe put southern Africa in jeopardy. Like ripples on a pond, which can drown a man already up to his nose in water, his actions can strain an uneasy peace in Kenya, affect food shipments to refugees in east Africa and add to the trials of Britain's beleaguered government.

It is not hard to imagine the events that could contain such a catalyst. Here is one scenario:

The UK urges its nationals to leave after the brutal harassment of supporters of the opposition MDC extends to whites in Harare and Bulawayo. A convoy to the South African border is attacked. The southern city of Bulawayo, an opposition stronghold, becomes the centre of an Ndebele group demanding autonomy for Matabeleland. Railway lines through the province to South Africa are sabotaged.

Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's president, offers Mr Mugabe sanctuary. It is spurned by the Zimbabwe leader but prompts countrywide protests organised by the South African trade union movement and backed by Jacob Zuma, Mr Mbeki's successor in waiting. Xenophobic attacks on Zimbabweans in South Africa spread. Somali-based terrorists bomb a tourist hotel

In east Africa, Kenya's fragile coalition, divided over its response to Zimbabwe, faces protests over food and transport price increases; there are further ethnic riots. United Nations aid to refugees in central Africa is held up.

If the catastrophe that draws nearer is to be averted, Africa's leaders have no time to lose. They must begin by publicly acknowledging that Zimbabwe is an African problem that Africa must solve. Existing measures, imposed by Europe, have proved futile. Bank accounts targeted for freezing have long been moved; cutting off school fees for children of Zimbabwe cabinet ministers who are studying abroad is morally dubious and politically futile. In a country where economy has collapsed, proposing formal economic sanctions is as effective as threatening to take a comb away from a bald man.

Acknowledgment of responsibility must be followed by the personal intervention of a distinguished emissary – and who better than a tough ex-soldier, the former Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, who was a member of the Commonwealth team sent to South Africa in 1986? He should fly to Harare and, authorised by Africa, deliver an ultimatum to Mr Mugabe: stand down immediately and call off the thugs; or face prosecution, initiated and supported by his African peers, at the International Criminal Court.

This ultimatum must be given weight by two moves that would isolate Zimbabwe's ruling elite and have an immediate impact. Unless Mr Mugabe complies, all flights to and from Zimbabwe should be halted, and a visa ban imposed on officials and supporters.

Why should African governments, after so long turning a blind eye to the horrors unfolding in Zimbabwe, now act in this unprecedented way?

For two reasons: only by radical, prompt action can they redeem their own tattered reputation; and above all, unless they deal with the rogue in their midst, one of the elements in the scenario above will precipitate a storm that will engulf them. So far the moral outrage perpetrated in Zimbabwe has failed to move them – but self-interest may. Without such action, Mr Mugabe's corrosive effect will be felt throughout the continent.

Mr Holman is a former Africa editor of the FT; Mr Mills heads the Johannesburg-based Brenthurst Foundation

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