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Zimbabwe needs the west to engage Mugabe

By Michael Holman

It is time for western governments to swallow their pride, re-engage in Zimbabwe and do business with Robert Mugabe.

The country's battered people urgently need help: compassion and self-interest demands that the west provide it; the future of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change could well depend on it; and the recent announcement that China has offered Zimbabwe a US\$950m (€671m, £576m) loan should concentrate policymakers' minds on it.

Six months after the introduction of a coalition administration, Zimbabwe remains in cruel limbo. Its children are still being orphaned by Aids and dying of preventable diseases. Its students remain without books or computers. Nearly half the population are kept alive by UN food shipments, but denied by western donors the resources that could allow the country to fend for itself.

Doing business with a dictator is anathema, maintain western diplomats. President Mugabe must go, they say, before regular aid can resume. Meanwhile, their governments keep their distance. They channel hundreds of thousands of tonnes of food aid through the UN's World Food Programme, and enlist non-government organisations to deliver the modest humanitarian help the west is prepared to allow.

All this takes place on the sufferance of Mr Mugabe. Every agency operating in Zimbabwe has signed an agreement with his administration, setting out the terms of its operations.

Were the west to take the advice of the MDC, the party in a coalition led by Mr Mugabe, this relationship could form the basis for assistance on a far bigger scale. Yet for all the genuine concern about dealing with a dictator, the west seems influenced by a desire for revenge on the man who has for so long defied its efforts to dislodge him.

Not only have these efforts ended in embarrassing failure – all too often they have backfired to Mr Mugabe's advantage. He has defied European Union travel bans, and made UN and EU sanctions look foolish.

And far from assisting the cause of Morgan Tsvangirai, the west's veto on increased aid has left the MDC leader in a bind that could lead to his political demise. When Mr Tsvangirai returned from a fundraising tour of western capitals, he had little to show for his efforts – and if he fails to improve the quality of life in Zimbabwe, MDC supporters are entitled to

ask why he joined the coalition in the first place.

So what can be done?

If the WFP can be trusted to ensure that food supplied by Britain and other donors reaches the needy and not the army, it can be trusted to implement a wider programme, supervising efforts to help Zimbabwe's small-scale farmers feed the country.

And if the NGOs can be relied upon to deliver the west's humanitarian aid to the deserving and not to Mr Mugabe's cronies, they can be trusted to implement an expanded programme of international assistance, delivered to specified areas, and backed by funds from official donors.

Lives saved from hunger should not be lost to disease, so western funds need to go towards medicines and hospital equipment; to save a generation from illiteracy, we should help revive an education system that was arguably the best in Africa.

Success cannot be guaranteed. But if fresh help is abused, there will be plenty of whistleblowers, whether among diplomats in Harare or the millions of Zimbabweans who crave a normal life.

But a recovery programme also needs to tackle the consequences of the eviction of 5,000 white commercial farmers. Whatever Mr Tsvangirai may say in public, it would be political suicide to attempt the return of white farms to their former owners.

Yet their skills need not be lost to the region. Let donors help to create an agricultural project in neighbouring Mozambique, near the border with Zimbabwe, to the benefit of both countries. Use funds earmarked for Zimbabwe to build the infrastructure Mozambique lacks, and to underwrite a Land Bank that would provide the capital and financial guarantees commercial farmers require – a package that should encourage Zimbabwe's white farmers, now exiled or jobless, to return to a new home on the land.

With every week, the aid impasse becomes more painful, and Mr Tsvangirai's predicament becomes more acute. Meanwhile, China looks on at a prize that the west is helping to make ready for plucking.

The writer is a former FT Africa editor

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