

Zimbabwe: Racism Resurfaces

In the aftermath of the death of Samora Machel, long-suppressed white racist attitudes have come to the surface.

By Andrew Meldrum

The office receptionist at a Harare mining firm was smiling broadly when an engineer returned from lunch on October 20. "She asked, Did you hear, did you hear the news?" and she looked so happy that I thought maybe we had all received pay rises," said the engineer. "Instead, she said 'Machel's dead. He was killed in a plane crash. He's dead.' I was shocked at her undisguised glee."

"The office was in a commotion all that afternoon," he continued, "Machel's death split the office on racial lines. The Whites were openly happy and the Blacks were upset and sad. In fact, the Whites were so heedless of the tragedy that they were surprised that I, a fellow White, was not also pleased at hearing the news. The office eventually got back to normal, but I don't think people will quickly forget that division."

One of the most troubling after-effects of the Mozambican leader's death is the resurgence of racial bitterness in Zimbabwe. The easy relations between Blacks and Whites in this country are legendary. Just six years after the bitter and bloody 15-year war to end white minority rule, all races mingle freely on the streets and in shops without incident. The death of President Machel, however, has brought

out the deeper antagonisms beneath that surface calm, brought out the Whites' brooding resentment that they have lost their absolute power and brought out the anger of many Blacks, who feel that they have magnanimously offered reconciliation only to be scorned by the Whites. That anger manifested itself on October 21 when a few thousand young Blacks, many of them university students, went on the rampage in Harare, burning and looting the offices of South African Airways and the South African trade mission in the belief that Pretoria ordered the killing of Machel. The crowd also sacked the Air Malawi offices to demonstrate their opposition to the Banda government's policy of aiding the MNR rebels on South Africa's behalf.

Significantly, once released, the anger became indiscriminately anti-White, and many Whites in the downtown area were beaten or threatened by the mob and their cars stoned. Order was restored and in the following days the mass demonstrations to protest against the killing of Machel passed off peacefully. Whites and Blacks mixed casually once again in Harare's city centre and Zimbabwe's renowned racial tolerance was restored.

However, there are signs that the order

is not even only skin deep. A visible section of the country's Whites are returning to their more offensive racist behaviour of pre-1980 Rhodesia. Racist comments and jokes seem to have slipped into conversation again. One white man in Marondera was arrested for celebrating Machel's death at his workplace, allegedly saying, "One black leader is gone and soon plenty more will be dead." Then, at the end of October, there was a Guy Fawkes day party where 2,000 young Whites gathered in the exclusive Harare suburb of Chisipite. The crowd made a big bonfire and put a "Guy" at the top, but many of them began calling the traditional figure "Samora" and later they began singing Rhodesian songs, according to one unwitting party-goer.

Many of Zimbabwe's tiny white minority—who at about 120,000 make up less than two percent of the population—remain unreconstructed Rhodesians in their attitudes and now seem to be reacting as the pressure on South Africa increases. "As the situation in South Africa gets worse, I think race relations in Zimbabwe will get worse," comments a Harare diplomat. "Every time something happens in the region, every time South Africa does something, then race relations here will probably suffer."

Gloomy View

There are a number of white Zimbabweans who do not harbour any racist sentiments and who are striving to make a non-racial Zimbabwe work, but they are finding it difficult. "We progressive Whites have blown it," said one education worker. "We have tried individually but we have not identified ourselves as a group or done anything really visible to support the government. It's easy for many Blacks to think that all Whites are unrepentant 'Rhodies.'" She takes a gloomy view, warning that there will be sharper times for the whole region. "Being in southern Africa now must be something akin to being in Europe in 1936," she says.

Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, for one, is not giving up on racial harmony in Zimbabwe. Answering a question in Parliament, he said the violent demonstrations against Whites were "unfortunate," as were the many instances of racial provocation by Whites. The prime minister said that now, more than ever, is the time to work together, the time to continue to work for the creation of a non-racial society. "We have done so well so far, let us not try to sit on our laurels and say that nothing can happen any more. We would be fooling ourselves if we did that," he warned. ▲▲▲