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Zimbabwe

Going nowhere

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From Economist.com

Zimbabwe will only recover when Robert Mugabe goes

AP/Reuters



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IT'S still there, and just as bad as ever. The outside world has all but forgotten Zimbabwe, where Robert Mugabe continues to preside over economic and political collapse. But the southern African country is marking miserable milestones by the day. Four out of five adults are now unemployed. Zimbabwe suffers the world's highest inflation rate, a stratospheric 1,600% and rising. Toilet paper is more valuable than bank notes. The price of bread (when it's available) more than doubled in January; mealie meal, a staple, rose by 500% last week.

Price freezes mean that basics, like milk and sugar, are rarely available. Many recently printed bank notes have not been issued because they are already worthless. Roughly 3m people, by some estimates, have fled the country, leaving about 12m behind. On Monday February 19th the European Union—to little fanfare—agreed to renew “smart” sanctions, including an arms embargo and travel ban for Zimbabwe's leadership, that have been in place for years.

The cause of Zimbabwe's collapse, ultimately, is Mr Mugabe's refusal to leave office. Increasingly under pressure from unhappy Zimbabweans, he has lashed out at an array of enemies, including black opposition leaders, white farmers, trade unions, women's groups, urban voters and Britain—the former colonial power. By seizing commercial farms and handing them to political cronies, Mr Mugabe may have staved off the end of his political career, but at the cost of ruining an economy dominated by agriculture. Aid and investment have dried up. Manufacturing has slumped.

The prolonged economic collapse is more typical of a country wrecked by war. The purchasing power of the average Zimbabwean today, for example, is back at levels last seen soon after the second world war, according to the Centre for Global Development, a think-tank in Washington, DC. Given widespread AIDS and hunger, this translates into thousands of unnecessary deaths each year.

When will anything be done about it? Weary analysts have stopped trying to predict how far the economy will have to collapse, or for oppression to worsen, before something snaps. But even leaders in the ruling ZANU-PF party know that recovery depends on getting the old crocodile out of office. Investors, farmers, refugees, tourists and

others will not return while Mr Mugabe's misrule continues. Yet managing his exit is proving impossible.

Rival camps in the ruling party are vying for eventual control, so nobody dares push the chief to go. (Indeed Mr Mugabe may be dividing his allies for precisely this reason). The army is watching suspiciously. The big neighbour—South Africa—is reluctant to get involved, fearing that any intervention may backfire. The opposition, deflated after seeing general elections rigged and its supporters crushed, has become timid and divided. Many of the brightest and bravest, in any case, are moving abroad. Nor are sustained street protests likely, though there are occasional signs of violence in the townships around the capital, Harare. Strikes are becoming more common. At the weekend heavily armed riot police in Harare crushed an opposition rally—despite High Court approval for it to go ahead—by firing teargas and using water cannon. Protesters responded by throwing stones. Over 120 people were arrested.

This week, to mark his birthday, Mr Mugabe will have a lavish party, to which teachers and nurses have been forced to contribute. He will also give a speech in which he is expected to mention his succession. Officially, after nearly three decades in office, he is supposed to go in March 2008. But a presidential election scheduled for that month may well be postponed for another two years, when he will be 86. In any case he has told foreign journalists, perhaps in jest, that he plans to rule until he is "a century old".

Is anything like that dismal prospect possible? Mr Mugabe is relatively healthy and alert, and has the tacit support of both other African countries and of China, which is asserting itself on the continent. And though outsiders occasionally grumble about the misery in Zimbabwe—America has called it an "outpost of tyranny"—the West has broadly decided that ignoring Mr Mugabe is the least bad strategy. Any change, therefore, is going to have to come from within. And, so far, Mr Mugabe has proved a master at stamping that out.