

## **'Cautious optimism' on Zimbabwe as EU eases sanctions**

by Geoffrey Van Orden MEP

**The EU showed in the case of Burma that democratic progress would be rewarded – and loosening restrictive measures on Zimbabwe could help speed up reforms there, writes British MEP**

A major shift in European Union policy towards Zimbabwe has been signalled with the suspension of its restrictions on development assistance, and the possibility of the suspension of many of its other restrictive measures if there is a peaceful and credible constitutional referendum in September 2012. Sanctions on President Robert Mugabe, and his inner circle, will remain in place.

We are under no illusions about the difficulties that remain but it is right to respond to the advice of those of goodwill who are most directly engaged locally and regionally in the political process. I am therefore cautiously optimistic about developments. In other places, such as Burma, we have recognised democratic change. We are now indicating that real progress in Zimbabwe will be rewarded.

The adoption of a new constitution is just the first step. The real test will be the elections that follow – these must take place before April 2013. The international community will expect the electoral preparations and the elections themselves to be carried out without intimidation and with rigour and fairness, properly supervised by, among others, the Southern African Development Community and the African Union.

The EU's restrictive measures have been in place since 2002 and currently target some 121 individuals and 11 companies with direct links to Mugabe and the upper echelons of his ZANU-PF party. Notable names on the list include Mugabe himself, his heir-apparent and defence minister Emmerson Mnangagwa, the chief of Zimbabwe's defence forces Constantine Chiwenga, and Mugabe's spy-master Happyton Bonyongwe. Given the past record of these individuals in orchestrating violence, oppression and exploitation, the ban on them will not be lifted, even if the constitutional referendum in September goes to plan.

Contrary to Mugabe's propaganda, the EU never imposed broad sanctions on Zimbabwe but used carefully targeted restrictive measures against "members of the Zimbabwean government guilty of human rights abuses". The aim was to hit them personally where it hurt through a travel ban and freezing of overseas bank accounts. The measures were also aimed at companies directly linked to Mugabe and his close associates. Many of the currently banned firms are involved in exploitation of Zimbabwean natural resources – diamonds in particular. Much of this diamond revenue has gone straight into the pockets of senior ZANU-PF party figures and senior military personnel, with very little benefit trickling down to the Zimbabwean people.

Despite what Mugabe and his allies may claim, the EU measures have not had adverse effects on the Zimbabwean economy or on the Zimbabwean people. The Mugabe clique has been entirely to blame for Zimbabwe's economic difficulties. The United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway and Turkey all agree: they have had similar restrictive measures in place against the regime. Now is an opportunity for those, even within ZANU-PF, that wish to distance themselves from Mugabe to play a positive role in Zimbabwe's future.

Those, such as Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change that have been the most consistent advocates of democracy, freedom, and the rule of law in Zimbabwe now feel that loosening the EU's restrictive measures may help speed up the reform process. British and other European governments have been listening carefully to such voices and to regional leaders in South Africa and elsewhere.

However, EU and British aid to Zimbabwe will continue to be channelled through non-governmental organisations rather than through direct payments to the Zimbabwean government. And there will be no movement on the EU arms embargo, which will remain in place for the foreseeable future. Of course, if there is any back-sliding the restrictive measures will be re-imposed and intensified.

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