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The Troubling Path Ahead for U.S.-Zimbabwe Relations

*House Hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
Chairman Chris Smith (NJ-04)
Excerpts of Remarks
September 12, 2013*

Good afternoon. Despite more than a decade of targeted sanctions, Zimbabwe has continued to be a major U.S. trading partner through the Generalized System of Preferences, even though it has been excluded from the African Growth and Opportunity Act. Chromium, platinum and diamonds have enriched Zimbabwe's leaders, but not its people.

Zimbabwe had been one of Africa's leading industrial powers and agricultural producers until its government diminished the ability of the country to sustain its industrial or agricultural production. Illegal and disruptive land seizures resulted in political cronies gaining control of productive agricultural land rather than the black farm workers as promised. Agricultural production suffered, dragging down manufacturers of agricultural equipment – the base of the country's industry. The reduction in tax revenues led to a desperate search for foreign funding to stabilize an economy whose inflation rate reached globally historic levels.

Nevertheless, Zimbabwe is a major player in southern Africa, even more so now that newly reelected President Robert Mugabe has been chosen as Vice Chairman of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the organization's anticipated Chairman next year. Facing international appeals for an end to sanctions on Zimbabwe and threats from the Mugabe government of economic retaliation, the U.S. must devise a policy that safeguards American interests while maintaining our support for democracy, human rights, good governance and economic development. Today's hearing will examine how the process of policy formation is going now and discuss what that policy should look like at the conclusion of that process.

The United States has experienced a troubled relationship with Zimbabwe since this southern African nation achieved majority rule in 1980. Robert Mugabe, the liberation leader who has led his

country since 1980, has always resented that our government did not support his war against the previous white minority government. Despite our efforts to establish a mutually beneficial relationship with Mugabe's government over the past couple of decades, his regime has spurned our hand of friendship and flouted international law and convention.

Using colonial-era laws as models, Mugabe's government has eliminated the possibility that the political opposition can credibly challenge his rule. It has limited the ability of the media to effectively report on the news of the day. It has restricted civil society advocates from documenting and verifying the many human rights violations that have taken place in Mugabe's Zimbabwe.

When Congress passed the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act of 2001, or ZDERA, it set out a range of aid restrictions requiring U.S. representatives on the boards of international financial institutions to vote against loans or debt cancellations benefitting the Zimbabwean government, pending fulfillment of a range of conditions based on repeal of the limitations on the freedom of Zimbabweans.

Recent annual appropriations laws also have barred U.S. support for international loans or grants to the government, except to meet basic human needs or to promote democracy. Generally, bilateral aid is prohibited, except that pertaining to health, humanitarian needs, education, or macroeconomic growth. Such prohibitions are maintained unless the Secretary of State certifies that "the rule of law has been restored...including respect for ownership and title to property, freedom of speech and association."

However, Mugabe's August 22, 2013 inauguration marked the end of a five-year period of often uneasy political power sharing with the opposition and partially fulfilled reforms pursued by the Government of National Unity under the Global Political Agreement. The end of the unity government means that unless a deal is struck with the ruling ZANU-PF party, its former partner in government, the opposition MDC-T party will likely no longer play a role in executive branch policy-making.

Past patterns of ZANU-PF governance, along with recent actions by ruling party officials and the MDC-T's new marginalization, indicate that Zimbabwe may be entering a period characterized by a pattern of unilateral exercise of state power potentially accompanied by manipulation of the rule of law in its favor; a lack of national political consensus and the absence of vehicles for alternatives to ZANU-PF policies; continued restrictions on the activities of civil society organizations and opposition activists, including legal and extralegal harassment and violence both by the police and by ZANU-PF supporters, and weak economic growth due to ZANU-PF's pursuit of a nationalist economic agenda focusing on state interventions in the economy.

The Mugabe government has long blamed the United States and Great Britain for hampering its economic growth due to sanctions, but aside from direct aid limitations, most sanctions are targeted toward Mugabe and his government's leadership. SADC is now calling for a removal of sanctions against Zimbabwe and is being joined by a growing international chorus that includes a few voices from within the Congress of the United States. Meanwhile, President Mugabe has threatened to punish Western firms operating in Zimbabwe unless sanctions are lifted.

But questions remain about the willingness of the Mugabe government to take the steps necessary to rescind U.S. sanctions. If Zimbabwe takes a defiant stand, where does that leave U.S.-Zimbabwe

relations? The Administration has tried limited relaxation of sanctions only to be met with continued refusal to accept reform. Where does this leave U.S. policy?

We have with us today U.S. government officials involved in developing and implementing our nation's policy toward an important nation in southern Africa. We also have with us Zimbabwean and American civil society observers of developments in that country.

However problematic our relationship with Zimbabwe has been, we need to devise a policy that fulfills our national interests, protects the human rights of Zimbabweans and enables this former industrial power to resume its rightful role in Africa's economy and the global economy as a whole.