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‘The Future of U.S.–Zimbabwe Relations’

*Rep. Chris Smith, Chairman
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
June 3, 2015*

Zimbabwe is a country the size of the state of Montana, with a population of nearly 14 million people. However, its mineral wealth gives it an outsized importance. The southern African nation is the world's third largest source of platinum group metals and has significant reserves of nickel, gold, chromium and dozens of other metals and minerals. Significant diamond reserves were discovered in 2006. Currently, about 40% of the country's foreign exchange is earned from the export of these metals and minerals.

It was the abundance of such mineral resources, and their exploitation, which has driven the relationship between the West and Zimbabwe. Since its colonization by Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company in 1889 on behalf of Great Britain, the area once known as Southern Rhodesia has experienced a tumultuous history. The white minority gained self-governance in 1922, and a 1930 Land Apportionment Act restricted black access to land, making many Africans laborers and not land owners. In 1964, the white minority government unsuccessfully sought independence from Great Britain, and then unilaterally declared independence a year later under white rule. This move sparked international outrage and economic sanctions, and that regime was never widely recognized by the international community, though the support of white-ruled South Africa enabled the government to limp along.

Meanwhile, black opposition to minority rule, which began in the 1930s, erupted into a guerilla war in 1972. Attempts to end the conflict diplomatically failed until the 1979 talks brokered by Great Britain resulted in British-supervised independence elections. The winner of those election was Robert Mugabe, leader of the Zimbabwe African National Union (or ZANU), who at age 91 continues to rule this country, in large part through intimidation and manipulation of elections.

As a hero of the independence and majority rule movements, Mugabe has enjoyed the support of many other African leaders, who have considered him an honored elder and have generally declined to join in international efforts to sanction his government. This has placed the United States in an awkward position, with limited African support for political and economic reforms in Zimbabwe.

Although many observers have credited the Mugabe government with productive management until fairly recent years, there were political problems from the beginning of his rule. For example, Mugabe fired fellow independence leader Joshua Nkomo in 1982 and then launched a campaign to suppress what his government called a rebellion by pro-Nkomo forces. The Mugabe regime has been accused of killing thousands of ethnic Ndebele citizens over the next few years to end the supposed rebellion, assisted by military advisors from East Germany and North Korea.

Once one of the leading industrial nations in Africa, Zimbabwe began a long economic downward spiral in the late 1990s. Squatters, with the support of the Zimbabwe government, seized white farms they claimed had been stolen by white settlers in the past. Despite government assurances, these farms were not transferred to black farm workers, but rather to cronies of the Mugabe government who lacked agricultural experience. Both whites and blacks in Zimbabwe acknowledged that the land policies had been unfair, but the manner of addressing this problem led to serious economic problems for the country.

Agricultural production fell, and the manufacturing sector, heavily tied to agriculture, also diminished. Efforts to squeeze currency for shrinking national reserves from businesses, coupled with the disastrous requirement that businesses use the fictitious exchange rate, caused retailers to lose money with each sale. The effort to close the many vendors who supplied tourists with souvenirs and citizens with necessary household items was yet another milestone in Zimbabwe's economic collapse. By 2006, year-on-year inflation exceeded 1,000%. Devaluation of the currency and the subsequent use of foreign currency are credited with eventually preventing a complete economic collapse.

Zimbabwe and the United States have had a tempestuous relationship since that southern African country emerged from white minority rule. Part of the problem has been resentment by Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe and his closest advisers against the United States for not supporting their liberation movement, the backdrop to which was the geopolitical conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. Another part of the problem has been the justifiable public criticism of repressive political policies by the Mugabe government by successive U.S. administrations. Consequently, the minimal communications between our two governments has contributed to suspicions and an inability for U.S. officials to reach out to cooperative Zimbabwe officials.

Successive elections have been the subject of opposition and international criticism for the lack of political space allowed to those who would challenge the ruling ZANU party. Arrests, incarcerations, torture in custody, beatings at public rallies and demonstrations and disappearances of government opponents have denied legitimacy to the Zimbabwe election processes. The country's commitment to democratic governance has been further placed in

question due to a series of repressive laws preventing freedoms of speech, association and movement.

As if the government's repressive tactics are not troubling enough, political jockeying in Zimbabwe, including the recent dismissal of Vice President Joice Mujuru, places the succession to President Mugabe in doubt, which puts U.S. policy in question. Today's hearing will examine current U.S. policy toward Zimbabwe and the prospects for an enhanced relationship depending on events that have not yet taken place.

Of course, in foreign policy, one cannot wait until a crisis materializes in order to create a planned response. A leader nearing the century mark, presiding over a fractious political scene in a country that has experienced political and economic turmoil creates a situation in which planning for a positive outcome to regime change must be devised.

Zimbabwe is a country rich in both natural and human potential. Once the resentments of the current old guard have passed and democratic governance can be established, U.S.-Zimbabwe relations can become what they have never been: harmonious and mutually beneficial.