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Zimbabwe's Humanitarian Crisis

This year's topic for the Youth Institute paper is "Understanding the Trends in Global Nutrition: The Paradox of Hunger and Obesity." My focus will be on the hunger and malnutrition crisis in Zimbabwe. This will include the fluctuation of food shortages, who is most affected and how, what impact the government has had on the food crisis, and what else can be done to help those who are hungry. Zimbabweans are no stranger to hunger, for some of them, it's a common state. There are several factors that play key roles in the hunger situation: drought, land seizures, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. I hope that by the end of this paper, you will be more informed on the situation in Zimbabwe and will better understand that this isn't something for us to shrug off, but something for us to act on.

Drought is a pretty obvious reason for people to go hungry and Africa has had its share of drought in the past years. In recent years they have gone with very little rain. When the rain doesn't come the crops can't grow. This leaves the farmers with barely enough to feed their families and nothing to sell for profit.

In 2003, it was estimated that up to 2 million Zimbabweans were "displaced persons." We are seeing a large number of people moving around the country looking for food and work. The rate of people moving into Zimbabwe has dwindled down to nothing, while the number of Zimbabweans leaving the country is on the increase, many moving to South Africa or Botswana. In the last few years, President Robert Mugabe has started a progressive land reform movement. With this reform, the government has taken land from white farm owners and given it to black farmers. In the year 2000, 4,500 farms in Zimbabwe were owned by whites. As of November 2002 there were only 400 white farmers still on their land. The government also won't fully compensate the white farmers for their crops and have suggested that the UN step in and cover the difference. Zimbabweans believe that Mugabe is targeting people who don't support his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front party (ZANU-PF) in this reform and, unfortunately, if all reports can be believed, they are correct. Mugabe and the war veterans of Zimbabwe's war for independence, say that the land they are taking back was stolen when they were ruled by Britain. A group of war veterans resorted to harassing the white land owners in an effort to hurry along the process of eviction. There have been several reports of this group of radicals beating black farm workers and, at times, even their children when they are suspected to be against the reform.

Mugabe and Zanu-PF have claimed that they are forcing this land reform so they can give it to those who have no land, but what we are seeing tells a different story. One story goes like this: In November of 2002, one particular farm was working normally with a white Zimbabwean at the helm and 200 farm workers taking care of the tobacco crop. Five months later, the owner was evicted and the workers were forced to leave the tobacco to die as the house was being guarded by war-veterans until the it was inhabited by its new owner. One worker, Grace, a mother of ten states, "We have no food, no money, and no work. Who will feed my children now?" Her children get one meal a day, and this they have to scavenge for. Later on I will talk more about the affects land seizures have on the people of Zimbabwe and their economy.

In July of this year, Mugabe's party, Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF), went to select cities to demolish the homes of nearly 700,000 citizens with little or no notice. The President calls this demolition of homes, "Operation Murambatsvina" translated as "Drive out Rubbish", which is suppose to give sanity back to citizens because, according to Mugabe, the cities are full of criminals. They report to be taking down only the illegal structures. These urban areas had the strongest aversion to his rule but, strangely, the homes of supporters of the Zanu-PF party haven't been spared either. The government would like to see the people go to rural areas where they would be more easily controlled. "In the countryside they have no newspaper or radio except Zanu-PF propaganda, and they are controlled by the chiefs, who support the government," says the Catholic Archbishop of Bulawayo, Pius Ncube. (*Dumped In Zimbabwe's Poor Villages*, BBC news) Some ten thousand people were taken from areas surrounding Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, and dropped off at Hopley Farm. There was no food or shelter until two weeks later when a pitiful amount of food was left for them. In this settlement a young mother died because of the unsanitary water that the people there were forced to drink. Her children are staying with their grandparents who have no way to support them. From one settlement we hear confusion. People say they were told by the government to build their former homes in the very spot the government now says is illegal. (*Living in Fear After Harare Evictions*, BBC News) These people are living in fear. Whom can they trust? The future is so uncertain.

This scenario isn't unheard of in Africa. Other African governments have done something much like the Zimbabwean government has: Nigeria – 1990, 300,000 people were bulldozed out of their homes; Ivory Coast – 2002, citizens were driven out of their houses at gunpoint with less than an hours notice. Leaders from affluent countries have requested the other African nations to put pressure on Zimbabwe to stop the evictions. To condemn Mugabe would be like condemning themselves. UN relief organizations predict over three million people will need food aid this year. (*Why Africa won't Condemn Zimbabwe Blitz*, BBC News) When people are shoved into these situations with little or no warning, they need help to survive. Many of these people being dumped in the country are second and third generation city dwellers, knowing very little about how to survive outside an urban area. Secondly, these people are often sent to the villages where extended family members live. For family members who were asking for financial support from the urban dwellers, there coming is a burden, since no food or money came with the extra mouths to feed.

The past twenty five years has seen the HIV and AIDS rate has go up in astronomical proportions all over the world. In Zimbabwe, as of 2001, there were 1.8 million people living with HIV or AIDS with an adult prevalence rate of 24.6%. The death rate, due to the virus, is 170,000 Zimbabweans in one year alone!(C.I.A. fact book). For a country that is slightly larger than the State of Montana, this is a jaw-dropping figure. HIV/AIDS is transmitted in various ways; through needles, sexual intercourse, from mother to infant, through breast milk, and through blood transfusions. It isn't very hard to become infected with the virus. When referring to Zimbabwe's HIV/AIDS epidemic, BBC News says, "A whole generation of parents are being wiped out by AIDS." This is a sad fact, but a reality for a growing number of Zimbabweans. We are seeing more and more "child-headed households", children are taking care of children. Parental deaths has also resulted in more grandparents raising their grandchildren.

When a family's breadwinner is infected with the disease, the whole family suffers from the lack of income. People with HIV/AIDS must have proper nutrition to stay active. When they are unable to work, they rely on family or medical services to care for them and often times, medical services are next to nil. If the family is busy caring for the infected person, then the

income can't be enough to care for all of the necessities. Let me give you an example of a family in this situation.

Jabulani, his wife Zodwa, and their three children live in a worker settlement on the farm where they used to work. Jabulani was diagnosed with HIV two years ago and is physically unable to work, though, even if he were able, because of the land seizures he wouldn't be allowed to. His employer's land was confiscated and war-veterans weren't allowing anyone who lives there to work. Jabulani's diet consists of whatever Zodwa and the children are able to scrounge up that day. Zodwa worries that with the diet he is living on, berries and roots, he won't be able to hold on much longer, he is unable to even feed himself now. The lack of food is causing his illness to progress at a much faster rate than normal.

Zodwa's mother, Helger, is the primary caregiver for five of her grandchildren. Two of Helger's children have died from HIV/AIDS, leaving her, a woman of seventy five, to care for the orphans. Two of Helger's other children have gone to other cities in search of better economic opportunities. The family hasn't heard anything from them since they left over two years ago. Zodwa's nieces and nephews have to be fed and sent to school, yet her deceased siblings have left nothing in way of resources to help ease this financial burden. Helger hasn't been able to get her maize crop planted since she didn't get the seeds early enough to plant. This means she won't have the profit from her harvest this year to buy food and send her grandchildren to school. Helger and the children are surviving only because of the monthly food distributions in their area. She, along with the other families that receive distributions, are eternally grateful that they are still getting them. In other areas of the country, the local charities are unable to get food to give to the hungry. Instead, they are forced to give the people money, which would be great if there was food available, but there isn't. When food is available to be purchased, due to the 200% inflation, it is still out of reach for those living in poverty.

From taking a look into the lives of Jabulani and Zodwa, we are better able to understand what a large impact HIV/AIDS has on a family, and whether or not they have food. This is a huge issue that needs to be addressed. Out of one hundred and forty eight countries, Zimbabwe is ranked the fourth highest in the category of people living with HIV/AIDS. If this is just pushed aside, more and more people will end up in situations like Zodwa and her mother.

The Zimbabwean economic situation is in dire need of help. As the other countries in the South African Development Community see their economic and social progress increase, Zimbabwe's is still deteriorating. The inflation rate is over 200%. To better illustrate how bad the situation is, consider this: fifty-five Zimbabwean dollars equals only one American dollar. (*Black Zimbabweans Suffer in Land Reform*, BBC news) Bread costs twice as much in the rural areas as in the city. Rural citizens of Zimbabwe, and some urban citizens as well, don't make enough money to pay the asking price. Therefore, even if citizens have money, they can't afford to buy what they need.

According to many of the nation's citizens and outside observers, the blame of Zimbabwe's poor economic situation lies on President Robert Mugabe's shoulders. Some of their reasoning deals with the land seizures that the government has implemented. Many areas of confiscated land aren't being tended or, as with Grace, the mother of ten, workers aren't being allowed to care for the crops. Since the land isn't cared for, the crops aren't being harvested and none of the excess yield can be exported, causing a drop in the country's revenue. In 2002, it was predicted that Zimbabwe would go from producing 220 million kilograms of tobacco to 20 million kilograms of tobacco. While that still may seem like a large amount, dropping 200 million

kilograms will have a huge impact on the economy especially considering that one third of the country's foreign reserves comes from the tobacco. Foreign reserves for Zimbabwe are used to buy fuel and other imports. In the same year it was anticipated the yield for that year's crop would be 10% of the normal yield hurting the economy even more. (*Black Zimbabweans Suffer in Land Reform*, BBC News)

In past years when world food relief organizations have offered help to Zimbabwe, frequently, these offers were put off by President Mugabe who would say that they would be fine. He didn't want any outside help. Later in the year, he would ask for help because it hadn't turned out as hoped. Often times when he would ask for help, it would already be too late for some of the people. He failed to see the need to be ready before famine hit. If Mugabe had done this, maybe Zimbabwe's crisis and needs wouldn't be so great.

With such a poor economy, how can the government buy food supplies to get the people back on their feet? The answer is "they can't". They are depending on other countries and food assistance organizations to supply the hungry with food. Yet the relief organizations are being restricted by the government. The Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) occasionally interrogates those bringing food relief. A former Anglican pastor that resigned when a bishop loyal to the Zanu-PF party was instated now works to get food to the needy. He says things aren't good. He reports that only one third of the line gets food, the rest go away hungry. He commented that the people who do get the help are supporters of Mugabe's party. (*Black Zimbabweans Suffer in Land Reform*, BBC News)

It may seem like the citizens of Zimbabwe haven't done anything to help themselves in this crisis. Yet, some have tried to make a difference. Many Zimbabweans will agree that their leader is at the core of their problems. Others have run against the Zanu-PF party in past presidential elections, but the campaigning ways of Mugabe aren't those of a democracy. They remind me more of Saddam Hussein and his regime's ways of politics. Zimbabwe has a "secret police" called the CIO. People don't know who is a part of the CIO and who isn't. A stressful and nerve-wracking existence. A reporter for the BBC news writes of having been fearful during his visit to Zimbabwe. It wasn't from things he'd saw or heard, but because of the fear he felt in other people. Much of that fear stems from the CIO, wondering what the government will do next, wondering if they will eat tomorrow. Living with fear as their shadow makes it hard to stand up against the people who will eliminate any who oppose them.

The humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe seems almost insurmountable. The U.S. needs to do what we can to see that the situation doesn't deteriorate anymore. The solution won't be an easy one and it won't make all Zimbabweans happy. I think that the source of the problem is President Robert Mugabe and his Zanu-PF party. They need to be dealt with. Mugabe's political power is very important to him and nothing is too unethical for him to do to keep his power secure. In a briefing given as a Joint Statement on March 12, 2003, J. Scott Carpenter said, referring to the early '90s, "...Mugabe embarked on a reign of terror to consolidate political power - his political power. Using troops trained by North Koreans, he crushed his major political opponent, Joshua Nkomo, killing over 20,000 Zimbabweans and torturing thousands more in the process...." Mugabe and his party need to be taken out of the picture and this "democracy" needs to actually become one.

As soon as Mugabe and his cronies are out of power, the humanitarian crisis needs to be addressed. People need adequate shelter, nutritious foods, medical care, and clean water. Land should be given back to the rightful owners and jobs back to the people. The farmers need seeds that will grow in dry conditions and to be taught new techniques to better their yields. I truly believe that the people of Zimbabwe just need a boost up. If help is offered they will take it and not waste what's been given to them, whether it be supplies or knowledge.

In Zimbabwe people are dying as a result of no food. Elderly are starving to death and young children are dying because, in trying to ease their hunger, they unknowingly eat wrong kinds of leaves that poison them. The older children are unable to continue going to school as they can't physically make the long journey that is required of some or, when they arrive, they are unable to concentrate due to the hunger. All of these things are preventable, they don't have to happen. These people must be helped.

We as a world have no excuse not to. In this day, with global communication and advanced technology, we have means to share our wealth of knowledge and resources with those who've had fewer opportunities to thrive and prosper.

“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing”

- Edmund Burke

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