

Political punch-up inflames land war

By Fred Bridgeland

sundayherald.com | May 23, 2004

L iconic Australian cricket commentator and former test batsman Dean Jones injected a rare bit of dry humour into the tragedy that is Zimbabwe last week. Just before the Australian test team flew out of the country on Friday, following the collapse of the test series there because Zimbabwean cricket is riven by racism, Jones told TV viewers back home: “The boys have told me over a few frosties that they can’t wait to get the hell out of Dodge City.”

In the thuggish police state that is modern Zimbabwe, Jones would have been arrested and thrown into a fetid prison had he been a local commentator making such a remark. President Robert Mugabe’s political commissar on the Zimbabwe Cricket Union’s board, Oziya Bvute, has bodily thrown local journalists out of cricket commentary boxes for making mildly critical remarks about political interference with the sport.

The Dodge City quip was apt because it followed a High Noon physical confrontation in the Zimbabwean parliament between the justice minister, whose wife has appropriated several white farms, and a once successful white farmer who for several years has resisted bloody attempts by top black soldiers and policemen to take over his property.

Roy Bennett, an MP for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), was subjected to a torrent of racist abuse by justice minister Patrick Chinamasa. Bennett snapped when Chinamasa called him an “mbahanu” – an insult for whites in the Shona language that is the equivalent of “nigger”.

Bennett, some of whose black employees have been killed defending his business, charged at Chinamasa and wrestled him to parliament’s carpeted floor. The justice minister was unhurt, but Bennett’s assault set off a fresh wave of demonstrations, organised by President Robert Mugabe’s ruling ZANU-PF party, against whites and the MDC. Leaders of the War Veterans’ Association, which has spearheaded farm invasions over the past four years, planned fresh invasions of Bennett’s lands and warned him that he would be killed if he returned to Chimanimani, in the mountains of eastern Zimbabwe.

Political punch-up inflames land war / 2

Bennett says he regrets his actions, but added: "I am a person, I have feelings, and after the vehement personal, racial attack that Chinamasa was making, I saw red and reacted. I had been insulted on many previous occasions and bitten my tongue."

The story of the long siege of Bennett's Charleswood Farm near Chimanimani is dramatic and illustrates why Zimbabwe is the only country in the world whose GDP has not only failed to grow but has fallen in real terms for each of the last seven years.

Employing 350 full-time and 1350 part-time workers, Charleswood was one of Zimbabwe's most successful agricultural enterprises, exporting beef and coffee, producing maize for the domestic market and earning Zimbabwe millions of pounds in foreign exchange.

Trouble began in May 2000, prior to parliamentary elections, for which Bennett was selected as a candidate for MDC. Supporters of ZANU-PF, organised by the local ZANU-PF MP and top Central Intelligence Office (CIO) agents, invaded Charleswood. Bennett was absent, but his wife, Heather, who was four-months pregnant, was threatened with death, with a pistol held to her head, unless she sang ZANU-PF songs. She refused to do so, but farm workers were beaten up and Heather miscarried as a result of the stress.

Bennett, Heather and their two children went into hiding when he was told he would be killed if he campaigned. Despite his absence, Bennett was elected MDC MP for Chimanimani by a huge margin.

Mugabe, embarrassed by the defeat of his party's MP by a white farmer in what had been a ZANU-PF stronghold, turned up the heat. When locals refused to occupy the popular Bennett's farmlands, Mugabe appointed one of his most fervent loyalists, army general Mike Nyambuya, as provincial governor. Nyambuya began settling army units on Bennett's pastures, where 1200 head of prime beef cattle grazed, and ordered Bennett to leave.

Bennett refused and was arrested, but fought his removal order through Zimbabwe's cowed but still functioning courts. The army was ordered to quit the farmland, but has refused to do so.

Mugabe likes to boast that "we have degrees in violence" to intimidate and terrify his opponents. Nyambuya now put his decree to work. Bennett's white farm manager, his wife and the black farm workers were rounded up, removed to army premises and severely beaten. Bennett himself, born and educated in Zimbabwe, was arrested, stripped, accused of being a "British puppet" and beaten on the soles of his feet. He was charged with acting as an unlicensed journalist for taking photographs of his local polling station. At the trial Bennett was found not guilty.

In March last year 60 senior army, police and CIO officers turned up at Charleswood demanding to know Bennett's whereabouts. When black staff refused to speak, they were

Political punch-up inflames land war / 3

badly beaten and one, Steven Toner, died after having also been subjected to electric shock torture. Bennett acquired a court order permitting his staff to return to their homes .

Nyambuya organised another raid on February 10 this year. Farm labourer Sheni Chimbarara was shot dead and fellow worker Viola Ngwenya, 18, was gang raped. The home of Bennett's security manager, Amos Makaza, was burned to the ground.

A few days before his parliamentary tussle with Chinamasa, Bennett secured yet another court order calling on the army to vacate his farm. He refuses to give up. "There are some things in life worth taking a stand for," he said.

"This crisis in Zimbabwe is not a black-and-white fight. This whole disaster is an injustice against all Zimbabwe's people under a presidential alibi of 'correcting colonial injustice'. I know I have to carry on because the great majority of my constituents are 100% behind me.

"As long as the people want me to represent them, I will never give up. No threats, no intimidation will work"

Elsewhere, Edwin Moyo, the black owner of Zimbabwe's biggest exporting farm, Kondozi, which sends millions of pounds worth of produce to Tesco in the UK, has given up. His lands were invaded earlier this year by a group of militants led by agriculture minister Joseph Made. Some 5000 workers were assaulted and expelled from their homes.

Moyo said that he had been offered huge tracts of land and multi-million pound loans in both Zambia and Mozambique to rebuild his business. "I will not waste any more time on Kondozi," he said. "I have been rendered a second-class citizen in my own country, so now let Minister Made take Kondozi while I take my business elsewhere."

Fred Bridgeland is a Johannesburg-based foreign correspondent for Glasgow's Sunday Herald.