

SADC mediation must be allowed to breathe

Peter Kagwanja: COMMENT

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The recent Southern African Development Community (SADC) summit in Lusaka was clouded by a seven-year-old face-off between Africa and the West over Zimbabwe. And the continuing brinkmanship promises to haunt the Euro-Africa summit in Portugal and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Uganda, both of which take place later this year -- even as mediation efforts continue.

The 14-member SADC resolved to put together a blueprint to bail Zimbabwe out of its economic woes, but critics are already warning that Africa stands to pay a heavy price for not "reining in" Harare.

"Failing ... to get to grips with the issue of Zimbabwe, the SADC leaders are seriously undermining Africa's credibility on the world stage," chides John Morrison, a former foreign correspondent for Reuters. "They may get a rude awakening the next time they lobby for a better global deal for their countries on the world stage."

Zimbabwe's economic and political meltdown has been recognised as a security and economic threat to the region, where there are no less than three million refugees. But in some eyes the real threat is ideological. The seven-year stand-off between Africa and the West has emboldened Robert Mugabe, who has cloaked himself in the garb of African resistance -- a victim of racially inspired retribution for seizing and handing over white-owned farms to black Zimbabweans.

South African President Thabo Mbeki's continuing efforts to mediate a political settlement between Mugabe and the opposition provide the best chance for levelling the playing field ahead of the 2008 elections -- and these efforts must be given a chance to breathe. But there are no certainties.

Zimbabwe's ruling party is torn apart by the stampede to succeed Mugabe, who has declared that he is pitching for the 2008 elections. One can only speculate about ferment in the military. The opposition, meanwhile, remains too divided to be a real threat to Mugabe and Zanu-PF.

The European Union and the United States have frozen assets and slapped a travel ban on Mugabe and 128 of his top associates and their spouses. But sanctions and isolation have fostered an international climate that is dangerously hostile to Zimbabwe's economic recovery.

Portugal, which currently holds the EU presidency, has decided to waive the travel ban and invite representatives of the Zimbabwean government to attend the December 8 to 9 Euro-Africa summit. This has attracted severe criticism, particularly from Britain, and Prime Minister Gordon Brown is likely to stay away.

This sort of political theatre aside, the SADC mediation should focus on securing constitutional reforms, an economic recovery plan and electoral reforms ahead of the 2008 elections. But a bit of help from the likes of Sam Nujoma and Kenneth Kaunda, who have the necessary liberation

credentials to urge Mugabe to step aside and oversee a peaceful transition, could also help ease the tension.

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