

Introduction

Africa's Paradise, better known as Zimbabwe, is a country of vast blue skies, rich red earth, wide-open spaces and unequalled wildlife. Its varied landscape is home to the largest curtain of falling water in the world – and one of the natural wonders of the world – Victoria Falls, and a friendly people with a deeply welcoming attitude and irrepressible zest for life. Yet, beneath the spectacular beauty is a nation torn apart by division, greed and mismanagement.



History

First inhabited by Khoisan hunter-gatherers, Bantu tribes arrived during the fifth century AD, largely replacing the Khoisan. Between 1100 and 1500 AD the Shona, the most dominant of the tribes, built a prosperous empire.

Europeans first arrived in the area during the 16th century. By 1888 Cecil Rhodes, a British citizen, obtained a concession for mineral rights from local chiefs. Seven years later the territory was officially named Rhodesia (after Rhodes) and came under the administration of the British South African Company (BSAC). The BSAC administered Southern Rhodesia until 1922. That same year the settlers – all Europeans – chose to become a self-governing British colony. A period of great prosperity followed.

In 1953 Southern Rhodesia joined Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and Nyasaland (now Malawi) to form the Central African Federation. Ten years later the Federation had dissolved and the white minority administration of Rhodesia demanded independence from Britain. Independence was refused. Prime Minister Ian

Smith and his government responded by declaring themselves unilaterally independent in November 1965.

Opposition to Smith's minority rule intensified especially between the Rhodesian Security Forces and the guerillas – the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army.

By 1978 the country became known as Zimbabwe Rhodesia, with blacks in the majority of seats for the first time and Abel Muzorewa as Prime Minister. Still the guerilla war continued.

In 1979, in an attempt to negotiate an end to the civil war, the British intervened. An election was held in 1980 and was won by Robert Mugabe, a committed Marxist and member of the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front.

Mugabe is still in power today having survived insurgencies and guerilla activity. However, Mugabe is becoming increasingly unpopular and holds onto power by heavily censoring opposition parties and the press.

During the elections of 2002 Mugabe was re-elected to office amidst controversy and worldwide criticism. Zimbabwe was suspended from the Commonwealth.

In 2005 Operation Murambatsvina, meaning Drive Out the Trash, began in an alleged attempt to crackdown on illegal markets and homes. Around 700,000 people's homes were demolished.

The opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has united with other public organisations to stand against Mugabe's perceived dictatorship and place pressure on the government for a new constitution.

Tensions are escalating following an election in March 2008 and subsequent run-off, as President Mugabe is trying to keep a hold on this once prosperous country.

Current challenges

- ▶ In 2000 squatters seized white farmers' land, followed two years later by a government-imposed land-acquisition law. The law disposed about 3,000 farmers of their land resulting in a desperate food shortage, famine and a shattered economy.

- ▶ Zimbabwe is in an economic freefall. In May 2008 the year on year inflation was at around 355,000 per cent. A family of five need an average of 20 million Zimbabwe dollars a month to remain above the official poverty line.
- ▶ Since Mugabe's land reform programme was introduced agricultural production has plummeted and resulted in mass unemployment in rural areas which has had an enormous knock-on effect in the rest of the country. It is estimated that unemployment stands at more than 80 per cent, despite claims by the government that this figure stands at nine per cent. Unemployment has also led to mass migration from rural to urban areas. The country's food insecurity is a major problem affecting more than five million Zimbabweans. Crime is increasing as people are living as squatters in terrible conditions.
- ▶ Despite HIV infection rates falling, the HIV prevalence rate is still high at 24.6 per cent. Over 1.1 million children have been orphaned by Aids. According to experts, inadequate health and social welfare policies and the country's abusive government are undermining the fight against HIV. Life expectancy is 37 years for men and 34 for women – the lowest life expectancy in the world.
- ▶ It is estimated that three million Zimbabweans have left the country.

BMS involvement in Zimbabwe

Although there are currently no long-term mission workers from the UK in Zimbabwe, BMS World Mission supports Baptist partner, the Baptist National Convention of Zimbabwe. The president of the convention is Brighton Mpofo and the General Secretary is Gibson Muzhombwe. Baptists in Zimbabwe have formed an association running vitally important feeding programmes for thousands of families.

Background Information

The land

Zimbabwe is situated on a high plateau in south central Africa and is a land-locked country at the base of the African continent. It is bordered by South Africa, Botswana, Zambia and Mozambique. The country's north-eastern border is formed by the Zambezi River (where the Victoria Falls are found) and the Limpopo River in the south.

Religion

Despite post-independence attempts to impose Marxism-Leninism on the country there is freedom

of religion. Around 71 per cent of Zimbabweans claim to be Christian. Of this number between 40 and 50 per cent attend Christian churches. However, Christianity is often blended with other indigenous beliefs.

There is strong church growth in Zimbabwe with the number of evangelicals rising from 1.3 million to three million. Church growth is particularly noticeable amongst indigenous Zimbabwean churches. In the face of the current problems Christian denominations within the country have united around a common goal to be a voice of moderation and reconciliation.

There are over 131,000 Baptists in Zimbabwe who belong to more than 440 churches which make up four different Baptist Conventions/Unions.

Prayer points

- ▶ Give thanks for the incredible growth of churches in the country. In 1992 Christians in Zimbabwe committed to seeing the number of churches double before the year 2000. By the millennium churches had grown from 10,000 to 20,000. Pray that this growth would continue and that mature leaders would emerge to lead the new churches.
- ▶ Pray for the government who have huge obstacles to overcome: unemployment, HIV, malnutrition, food shortages and crime all need to be addressed. Pray that they will address these issues in the best interests of the people and with honesty and wisdom.
- ▶ Pray for the many people who are suffering due to the mismanagement of their nation.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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