

US, Zimbabwe rift widens

The Zimbabwe Standard by Farai Matiashe

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[Photo added from Internet]

Foreign Affairs minister Sibusiso Moyo's threat to expel United States ambassador to Zimbabwe Brian Nichols following a row over sanctions has put the country's efforts to re-engage Washington in jeopardy, analysts have warned.

Moyo last week accused Nichols of behaving like a member of the opposition and disrespecting President Emmerson Mnangagwa's government after the US envoy said corruption, lack of rule of law and poor governance were behind Zimbabwe's economic crisis, not sanctions.

The fallout came after Mnangagwa on October 25 led an anti-sanctions march in Harare.

Nichols in various interviews with local media described the march as a propaganda gimmick to mask the real reasons behind Zimbabwe's economic collapse.

A US embassy official revealed that Moyo had met Nichols on the day the minister issued the stinging statement. The official, however, could not disclose specific issues discussed at the meeting.

"The ambassador met with Moyo on October 31. They discussed a wide variety of bilateral issues, including political and economic reforms," the official said.

"For more information, please contact the Foreign Affairs ministry."

Ibbo Mandaza, the Southern Africa Political Economy Series trust director, said Moyo's statement showed that tension between Washington and Harare was escalating.

He said the statement also showed that Zimbabwe's efforts to re-engage the US after years of international isolation were floundering.

"Things are falling apart, but with very serious implications," Mandaza said.

"It is not difficult to conclude who's going to be worse off.

"This reflects the growing consensus, internally and externally, that this government has not only failed, but is also in real trouble."

MDC secretary for international relations Gladys Hlatshwayo said Moyo's approach was not helpful. She said the government needed to put its house in order and stop blaming outsiders for its own failures.

"You mount a spirited effort to maliciously frame a foreign country as the source of your problems and you unashamedly expect them to be quiet and take in your nauseating daily dosages of propaganda," Hlatshwayo said.

"We warned Zanu PF that marching and praying was not going to help.

"What is urgently needed are comprehensive reforms if we are to mend our relationships with the international community.

"The march escalated the feud and did more harm than good. "The statement by Moyo is regrettable and highly undiplomatic, one we do not expect to come from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

Nichols has in the past said government needs to implement political reforms, improve its human rights record and fight corruption if the on-going re-engagement efforts are to bear fruit.

The US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations immediately came to the envoy's rescue, saying he had said the truth about relations between the two countries.

"The US is deeply committed to the people of Zimbabwe," the committee chaired by Senator Jim Risch said.

"Ambassador Nichols set the record straight that culpability for Zimbabwe's dire economic situation rests with its leaders, provided the truth about sanctions and reiterated our strong and lasting commitment to a free and open Zimbabwe."

United Kingdom based political analyst Alex Magaisa said Moyo's statement was unprecedented and showed that relations between Zimbabwe and the US were at an all-time low.

"We are in uncharted territory under Mnangagwa's rule," he tweeted. "Not even at the height of hostilities under former president Robert Mugabe did we reach these threat levels."

Harare-based political analyst Sharon Hofisi, however, believes that Moyo's action will not derail the re-engagement efforts as he indicated in his statement that Harare was still open for dialogue.

"He left the possibility for Zimbabwe's engagement or continued engagement with the US open by suggesting that the US ambassador must not create the impression that he's partisan in his analysis of the sanctions march, which the government considered to be crucial," she said.

"As a minister of Foreign Affairs Moyo understands how diplomacy is used to effectively manage the goals of foreign policy from the perspective of ambassadorial communication," she said adding that, "in any event diplomacy becomes an instrument of statecraft where states define their own interests, including the issues relating to sanctions."

The US first imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe in 2000 citing the breakdown in the rule of law and human rights violations.

Washington introduced the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (2001), which among other things, restricts some Zimbabwean state-owned companies from doing business with US firms or individuals.

US executives in multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were barred from voting in favour of Zimbabwe for any financial package.

The sanctions were tightened the following year when Mugabe won a controversial presidential election against opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

The European Union, Canada, Australia and New Zealand cited alleged electoral fraud and human rights violations when they imposed wide ranging sanctions against Mugabe's regime.

A list of individuals that included Mugabe and his family were barred from visiting western countries and their assets abroad were frozen.

Harare, however, insisted that it was being punished for seizing productive commercial farms from white farmers, mainly from England, for redistribution to landless blacks.

Mugabe, who died in September this year, almost two years after he was ousted in a coup in 2017, used various international platforms to campaign for the removal of the sanctions to no avail.

Initially after taking over from Mugabe, Mnangagwa said Zimbabwe could not continue to "mourn about the sanctions" as the reason for the country's economic collapse as he pushed for reengagement with the west.

Mnangagwa's government, however, has changed tact after almost two years in office due to scepticism from western capitals that he is on a reform path and is now pushing an aggressive lobby against the sanctions.

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