



Better days: blacks and whites enjoy a day out in Harare before Machel's death

Machel death fuels Harare racism

From Andrew Meldrum
in Harare

Some 2,000 young whites recently attended a Guy Fawkes party in the exclusive Harare suburb of Chisipite. They made a huge bonfire and put a guy at the top, but then many began calling the traditional figure Samora, making racist jokes and singing Rhodesian songs.

"I realised that this was not a Guy Fawkes party at all but was in fact a UDI party, to mark the anniversary of Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence," an unwitting party-goer said. "They were celebrating their Rhodesian heritage and they were angry."

The still unexplained death of the Mozambican leader, Samora Machel, has increased tensions throughout the southern African region, and in Zimbabwe, one of the most troubling after-effects is the evidence of a resurgence of racial bitterness.

Easy relations between blacks and whites here are legendary. Just six years after a bitter and bloody 15-year war to end white minority rule, blacks and whites mingle together freely on the streets and work together in offices.

But Machel's death brought out the antagonisms lurking

underneath that deceptively surface calm: the whites' brooding resentment that they have lost their absolute power and the anger of many blacks who feel they have magnanimously offered reconciliation only to be scorned by whites.

At a public swimming pool a teenaged white girl shouted "Get out of my way," and roughly pushed past a black attendant who had been standing at the entrance.

"I wanted to tell that silly girl not to be so rude, but she marched away too quickly," a white woman who had also been there said.

"I wanted to tell her if she doesn't stop it she will get smacked one day," she said, but added: "Of course, she probably won't ever get hit by angry blacks, it will probably be someone like me who will be the victim of the anger she caused."

That black anger manifested itself the day after Machel's death was announced when a few thousand young blacks, mostly university students, went on the rampage in Harare, burning and looting the offices of South African Airways, the South African trade mission, and Air Malawi.

Significantly, once vented, that anger became indiscriminately anti-white and many whites in central Harare were beaten or threatened by the mob.

Order was restored and in the following days the mass demonstrations to protest against Machel's death were entirely peaceful, with no anti-white sentiment displayed. Whites and blacks once again mixed carelessly in the city centre and Zimbabwe's much-vaunted racial tolerance was restored.

But there are nagging signs that such a reconciliation is not even skin deep.

While teaching her library class, the same woman who witnessed the swimming pool scene began a discussion of current affairs and asked her class if they approved of beating up whites. "They shouted 'yeah' and 'right on' and one student jumped up and launched into a diatribe about how there must be a third world war in southern Africa to get rid of all the whites. I didn't know what to think, so I started in on the lesson," she said.

Plenty of reasons exist for such black bitterness. A visible section of the country's whites

— a tiny minority of some 120,000 in a total population of eight million — are unrepentant Rhodesians who continue to vote for Ian Smith.

Their voices have recently grown louder. Racist comments are slipping into conversations again. There have been several court cases recently such as the white man in Marondera who was arrested for celebrating Machel's death at his workplace. Many blacks were present when he allegedly said: "One black leader is gone and soon plenty more will be dead."

A mining engineer returned to his office from lunch last month to see the receptionist smiling broadly. "She asked, 'Did you hear? Did you hear the news?' She looked so happy that I thought maybe we had all received pay raises," the engineer said. "But instead she said 'Machel's dead. He was killed in a plane crash. He's dead.' I was shocked at her undisguised glee."

His office was in a commotion that afternoon as the news spread. "Machel's death split the office on racial lines," he said. "The whites were openly happy and the blacks were upset and sad."