

New Zimbabwe

Envoy Says U.S. Government Did Not Want to Know About Gukurahundi When It Happened

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April 28, 2016

President Ronald Reagan's government did not just fail to fully appreciate the extent of the Matabeleland killings but White House simply did not want to know what was happening, a senior US envoy has said.

William M. Bellamy, who was a junior US embassy staff in Harare at the time, said this during a panel discussion with David Coltart on his book *The Struggle Continues: 50 Years of Tyranny in Zimbabwe*, at the The Cato Institute, Washington DC.

Bellamy was U.S. Ambassador to Kenya between 2003 and 2006. Before that he was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs (2001-2003) and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs (2000-2001).

The US diplomat said the international community should shoulder the blame for letting President Robert Mugabe carry out the atrocities then as that gave him a sense of impunity.

He said, "The international community largely overlooked mass atrocities in Zimbabwe in the 1980s. That sent a message of impunity to ZANU PF."

"The idea that somehow there was nothing the international community could do to end or at least moderate Mugabe's depredations just doesn't stand up when looked at historically."

"..it was a dark time as David so vividly describes. I didn't fully appreciate that darkness then, nor did the US Embassy nor the US government.

"Since then, unfortunately, the international community has mostly failed Zimbabwe. I was a small part of that failure in the mid 1980s when the US government did not fully appreciate the extent of atrocities that had occurred in Matabeleland (which David and his colleagues later so bravely catalogued.). The truth is, we didn't really want to know."

Bellamy admits that the US policy was largely driven by their concerns about race relations and not human rights per se.

"We wanted to celebrate Zimbabwe's transition to independence, to extol its vast economic potential, to hold it up as a counter-example to apartheid South Africa," said Bellamy.

He added, "Looking back, I realize now that we were also happy overall at the state of race relations, at the fact that white Zimbabweans, those that had stayed, were mostly loyal and doing well and providing the capital and know how Zimbabwe needed to develop.

"And if white farmers were being killed by dissidents in Matabeleland who were supported by the apartheid regime, then perhaps it was understandable that tough measures were adopted by Harare.

"We were not sufficiently mindful of the canary in the coal mine."

Bellamy's comments are in tandem with those of British officials. Asked in the 2002 BBC Panorama programme why the British government had let Mugabe kill civilians in Matabeleland, former High Commissioner to Zimbabwe (1983-85), Sir Martin Ewans, said Gukurahundi was a "side issue".

"We had very much an eye to what was happening in South Africa at the time with apartheid and we were hopeful that Zimbabwe would be something of a contrast, and South Africans would look at Zimbabwe and say ah yes, it is possible to work as a multiracial society. So I think Matabeleland is a side issue. The real issues were much bigger and more positive and more important."

In the same programme, retired diplomats admit to travelling to Matabeleland where they witnessed the Fifth Brigade torturing civilians before driving away unconcernedly.

The west's stance on the killings then appears to have been shared by some whites.

Speaking to BBC's Jeremy Paxman in 1983, then Commercial Farmers Union president, Jim Sinclair said Mugabe's government was "justified in doing what it is doing in Matabeleland".

The killings, which lasted between 1982 and 87 claimed an estimated 20 000 civilians, according to human rights groups. In 2011, Genocide Watch declared the atrocities as genocide.

Vice President, Emmerson Mnangagwa, defence minister, Sydney Sekeramayi, and Mugabe have been blamed for the killings. Last week, former finance minister, Tendai Biti's party, PDP, expressed its horror at the west's apparent willingness to embrace Mnangagwa as Zimbabwe's future leader.

In the discussion, Bellamy reiterated what many western diplomats always say, that "the real international failure in Zimbabwe is more recent" meaning the period from the early 2000's to this date.