Why the international community turned a blind eye to the Gukurahundi

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I have been asked to speak on the question of why the international community turned a blind eye to the Gukurahundi.

The wording of the talk, as it's been advertised, is an adequate description of the broad topic, but I want to suggest that a little more precision would be helpful. Firstly, the term 'international community' works alright as a shorthand or synonym for 'foreign countries', but that's where its usefulness ends. There is no such thing as the 'international community' in the sense of a body of nations that is able to act in a unified manner with regard to matters of international interest. When it comes to the involvement of foreign countries in Zimbabwe during the 1980s, we are better off dividing them into three general categories—and then talking about the individual countries within each category. So I'm going to discuss how each the following three groups reacted to the Gukurahundi: former Zapu allies, Zanu allies, and Western countries. Another way of dividing it would be African states, Communist bloc countries, and Western nations. But let's stick with the first formulation.

A second element where we need more precision is the idea that foreign countries turned a 'blind eye' to the Gukurahundi. In and of itself, that's not a satisfactory summary of what actually happened. Some countries actively assisted Zanu-PF during the Gukurahundi—while, in the case of Western countries, the reality was more complex than the term 'blind eye' might suggest. Western countries did different things at different points. Remember that there were two 5 Brigade deployments in two different provinces over two different years, so this wasn't a single event. At certain critical points, Western nations acted—and even though the response was relatively weak, these actions had an impact. There were also points where a response was occurring, but it was slow and lackadaisical in relation to the circumstances. And then there were, indeed, points at which the response can be described as one of deliberate inaction. I'll talk more on these aspects in due course.

5 Brigade was deployed in Matabeleland North on 20 January 1983, allegedly in response to an upsurge in dissident activity. It's outside of the scope of this talk for me to describe the full context, but the key takeaway is that the official narrative is propaganda. This operation had everything to do with politics, comingled with tribalism and other animosities, and little to do with a much-hyped military or security threat. In pursuit of a one-party state, Mugabe and the Zanu-PF leadership wanted to liquidate Zapu and its support base by the time of the first post-independence elections—and the occupation and decimation of the Zapu heartland in rural Matabeleland was viewed as a key part of that process. Zanla had never controlled these areas during the war and Zanu-PF had no party structures to speak of in Matabeleland.

The official line was that 5 Brigade had been deployed to combat an insurgency, but there's a sense in which the opposite was true: this was an injection of Zanla forces into an area that had been beyond their reach during Zanu's insurgency of the 1970s. The other driver of the operation was the sheer hostility and hatred that many in Zanu felt for Zapu and its supporters. This had its roots in the party split of the 1960s, and in the further exacerbation of the inter-party rivalry during the war. The immediate backdrop, post-independence, is that Mugabe had been enraged by Joshua Nkomo's

refusal to merge Zapu into Zanu, despite the massive pressure that had been placed on the Zapu leader between 1980 and 1982. The two leaders had met for the final time on 14 January 1983, and there can be little doubt that Nkomo's failure to come on bended knee was the last straw in Mugabe's mind. It's no coincidence that 5 Brigade was sent into Matabeleland only six days later.

The first battalion of the brigade was deployed to Nkayi, Lupane and Tsholotsho, transiting through Bembesi and Bubi, while the second battalion was sent into Silobela. Public reports of mass killings emerged within a week of deployment. Zapu MPs, led by Sydney Malunga, reported the atrocities in parliament, and Nkomo called a press conference the next day, during which he said that there had been 'a massacre' in which an estimated 95 people had died. Foreign correspondents reported these statements in the international press, and then made field trips to Matabeleland which resulted in further reports of large-scale killings. Therefore, while the government made strenuous efforts to restrict the flow of information—and was largely successful within Zimbabwe due to its control of the newspapers and ZBC—there was, from early on, a stream of international reporting on the situation.

So what were the international players doing during this period? Zapu's most important African wartime ally—Kenneth Kaunda's Zambia—seems to have gone completely missing in action during this period, saying and doing nothing about the plight of Zapu and its supporters. The writing had been on the wall since as early as January 1981, when Kaunda had indicated publicly that Zambia was not going to become involved in a tussle between Zanu and Zapu. In other words, the message from Kaunda to Nkomo had been: 'You're an opposition leader now and you're on your own, umdala. I won't be calling you and don't call me.' The ultimate illustration of Kaunda's determination to wash his hands of Nkomo was Zambia's refusal to provide refuge for the Zapu leader in March 1983 when—at the height of the Gukurahundi—Nkomo had fled the country after an attempt had been made to assassinate him in Bulawayo.

Zapu's other major wartime sponsor had been the Soviet Union and it, too, had cut Nkomo loose and was engaged in a resolute and somewhat desperate effort to curry favour with the Zanu-PF government. Mugabe and co had little love for the Soviets after being treated like wannabee leaders of a second-rate nationalist splinter movement, so they were making the Russians grovel in their attempt to establish an official relationship with the Zimbabwean government. By 1983, the Soviet relationship with Zapu was a distant memory, and the last thing the USSR was going to do was provoke Zanu-PF by providing even rhetorical support for its former ally. The Russians, like the Zambians, refused to provide sanctuary for Nkomo after the assassination attempt.

Zapu's smallest former friend, Botswana, did remain sympathetic and provided a degree of low-key assistance. It gave Nkomo a place to stay after he crossed the border, and allowed him time to organise travel to Britain. By this time, Botswana had also accepted thousands of Ndebele refugees who had fled Matabeleland North, and it refused to hand over those among the refugees who were sought by Zanu-PF for political reasons—a position that did not endear Botswana to the Mugabe government, and there was a considerable amount of sabre-rattling on the Zimbabwean side. A compromise was negotiated in mid-1983, when the two governments signed a cooperation agreement, and thereafter those who had been suspected of involvement in banditry were deported to Zimbabwe.

Overall, then—apart from Botswana's discreet sympathy—Zapu's former allies treated Nkomo and his party as if they were radioactive. But Zanu's position in relation to its own former wartime partners was very different. Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere had rarely pretended to be even-handed with regard to the rivalry between Zanu and Zapu. He had, for example, vigorously

supported Mugabe against Nkomo during the elections of February 1980, when Zanu had used Zanla to guarantee the vote in Shona-speaking areas—and Tanzania now provided active assistance to Zanu-PF during the Gukurahundi. South African documents show that 15 Tanzanian radio operators were seconded to 5 Brigade, filling a critical operational gap created by the exclusion of ex-Zipra personnel and by a lack of ex-Zanla personnel with sufficient skills.

Two other Zanu allies also provided men who operated with 5 Brigade in Matabeleland. Multiple witnesses have spoken of Portuguese-speakers who were part of 5 Brigade—and these were almost certainly Mozambican forces provided by Samora Machel. Mugabe hated Machel, but was still quite happy to use him—and the Mozambican president owed his counterpart a debt after November 1982, when Mugabe had authorised the ZNA to assist Frelimo in an increasingly desperate struggle against Renamo. It is not yet clear what precise role Mozambican forces fulfilled within 5 Brigade.

Then there was North Korea, which, of course, had trained 5 Brigade at Nyanga—but what has been less well-publicised is that at least four North Koreans went into Matabeleland alongside the brigade. In addition, the Koreans trained a sixth brigade, which became an early version of the Presidential Guard, and this unit operated alongside 5 Brigade in Matabeleland South during 1984. The activities of the Presidential Guard have been almost entirely omitted from accounts of the Gukurahundi, but this unit committed significant atrocities akin to those of 5 Brigade.

Ok, so that sums up the contrasting positions of two groups of foreign countries in regard to the Gukurahundi—former Zapu allies, and friends of Zanu which were not so much 'former' allies, but rather active supporters and co-perpetrators.

Moving on to the West. We'll focus here on January to April 1983, because the interactions between Western countries and the Mugabe government in this period established the pattern for their dealings during the rest of the Gukurahundi.

I'll then give a brief overview of what happened during the rest of 1983, and then the deployment of 5 Brigade to Mat South in 1984.

By the way, the following account draws on previously classified documents from the United States, Canada, Australia and South Africa—and I'm also drawing on two studies by Hazel Cameron, who has written about the British and American responses to the killings.

Right, so I mentioned that 5 Brigade was deployed on 20 January 1983. There's no evidence that Western diplomats knew in advance that 5 Brigade was being sent in to perpetrate mass killings, but they became aware of atrocities soon after deployment. Apart from hearing Zapu's statements and reading the growing number of international news reports, diplomats had a range of private sources. These sources included the Catholic church, NGOs, and members of the CIO, ZNA and Zanu-PF. As is normally the case, diplomats were also sharing information with each other.

During February 1983, the debate in diplomatic circles essentially revolved around three questions: How extensive were the killings? Who was directing 5 Brigade? And what should be done?

An attempt to summarise this debate in just a few minutes brings with it the risk of over-simplification, but there's a couple of generalisations or observations that can be made. One of them is that Western representatives were slow to go to Matabeleland to conduct their own investigations. They were asking questions of their contacts, but not travelling to Matabeleland themselves. The contrast between diplomats and the activities of Western journalists illustrates this point. Within a day or so of Zapu's allegations in parliament at the end of January, three foreign correspondents had entered the area of 5 Brigade operations undercover. But, from what I can tell,

the first visit by a Western diplomat to Matabeleland didn't occur until 16 February, when a member of the British High Commission went to Bulawayo. By that time, hundreds more people had been slaughtered by the Gukurahundi.

This sluggish response meant that the debate about the scale of 5 Brigade atrocities was still going on between Western diplomats when others had already drawn conclusions and were making forceful appeals to the Mugabe government. Again, by way of contrast, the Catholic church had, by 12 February, already compiled a dossier with the names of 250 victims and were trying to get it to Mugabe. In a cover letter, the bishop of Bulawayo, Henry Karlen, told Mugabe that he was surprised that the government pretended to be unaware of—and I'm quoting here—unaware of 'the behaviour and brutal approach of 5th Brigade who terrorise and intimidate the population through murder of men, women and children'. He also wrote of his fear that a 'policy of genocide' was being contemplated.

At the other end of the spectrum, five days later, the British High Commissioner, Robin Byatt, was telling his headquarters in London: 'it is extremely difficult to get a really accurate picture of the extent of Fifth Brigade brutality … The behaviour of the Fifth Brigade has certainly been brutal but it is [our] impression that they are not out of control.'

A day later, he was forced to revise that conclusion. He spoke to a British missionary who had been living in Mat North, and he then wrote to London: '[the missionary's] reports ... substantiate allegations of widespread acts of brutality throughout the communal lands where 5 Brigade are deployed. He has personally witnessed many of these acts, and most seem well-authenticated. They range from murder to torture, rape and beatings. Men, women, and children have been victims … the brutality seems systematic and is indiscriminately directed against villagers, to whom they are reported to have said "all Ndebele are dissidents". The reports suggest that the number killed since 5 Brigade was deployed may well be substantially more that the couple of hundred I postulated in [my previous telegram].'

Other countries were coming to similar conclusions at this point, though they didn't send anyone to Matabeleland to investigate during the rest of February. On the same day as the British High Commissioner sent his revised assessment, 18 February, the Canadians wrote to their headquarters that 'soldiers of Five Brigade … have been sweeping through Matabeleland causing heavy civilian casualties'. The Americans, for their part, said that 'Five Brigade has been moving from village to village … "sorting people out".' They estimated that 1,000 had been killed and 'thousands more injured'.

These conclusions placed a greater focus on the question of who was directing 5 Brigade and what should be done about it. As far as action was concerned, the ball was left in Britain's court during the remainder of February, and nobody else made approaches to Zanu-PF. And the method adopted by the British was to talk to Zanu ministers in polite and non-accusatory terms during the course of their normal interactions—but not to make appointments for the exclusive purpose of discussing events in Matabeleland. The tone of these interactions is captured by the advice that the head of the British military assistance program gave to Rex Nhongo and Sheba Gava: 'the policy of military repression [of dissidents],' he said, 'has dangers and requires careful handling to avoid excesses.'

One thing to point out here is that—according to diplomatic traditions—there is a significant difference between informal interactions and what's known as a demarche, which is when an ambassador goes to the government and says, 'This is the position of my government on this

matter.' He or she might also hand over a note, which lays out that position. That's a much more formal procedure and it's regarded as a serious message from one government to the other.

On the question of responsibility for 5 Brigade's actions, various theories on the chain of command were knocked about. There was idea that commanders and foot soldiers had gotten over-zealous. There was the idea that certain extremists within Zanu-PF were proving difficult for Mugabe to control. As evidence mounted, there was the notion that the order hadn't been given to commit atrocities, but that once those happened, the political leadership was letting them go on. That debate wasn't resolved, in large part because there was a reluctance in many quarters to concede that Mugabe wasn't the moderate they had come to believe he was.

Back to the issue of what to do. It was only in the first and second weeks of March, when it became clear that rampant carnage was continuing, that a greater sense of urgency developed, and consideration was given by the different Western countries that they should make formal representations to the Mugabe government.

British High Commissioner Byatt met with Sekeramayi on 4 March and, quote, 'urged him strongly to ensure that excesses were curbed and that, while military force was needed no more was used than was essential to the requirement of the moment.' The US ambassador, Robert Keeley, followed up a day later, when diplomats gathered at Harare airport to farewell Mugabe and a number of ministers who were flying to an international conference. Keeley had given Finance Minister Bernard Chidzero a stack of American newspaper articles about the killings and had included a cover note saying that the Reagan administration might find it difficult to get the blessing of Congress for further aid money for Zimbabwe if the atrocities continued. Chidzero asked whether he could show the papers to Mugabe, who would be sitting next to him during the flight, and Keeley encouraged him to do so. Keeley later found out that Mugabe had pored over the papers for more than an hour, reading and re-reading the articles, and comparing them with each other.

This appears to have been a crucial episode, which—combined with other pressures on Mugabe—convinced him that the intensity of the killings must be toned down. Some of the other pressure points included a meeting with Karlen and the Catholic bishops before he left, another meeting with a group of NGOs who gave him a file containing photos of the atrocities—and then there were further representations by diplomats to Zanu ministers while he was away. He would have been informed of those approaches while he was overseas. There were also a series of other press reports in the international media during his trip.

The killings were still in full swing on the day Mugabe left. In fact, the largest massacre of the period—the killing of 62 people in northern Lupane—occurred on that day. It's also not a coincidence that the attempt on Nkomo's life was made on that same night, after Mugabe had flown out. Mugabe seems to have often left the country at or around the time a major operation was to be executed. For example, he also flew out of the country on 20 January, the day 5 Brigade went in to Matabeleland.

Documents from South African intelligence confirm that Mugabe issued instructions for a change of approach in Matabeleland. One of those documents reads: 'Fifth Brigade received orders to better treat the local population in Matabeleland [as a consequence of] the negative international publicity that the actions of the Fifth Brigade had received.'

On-the-ground surveys also indicate that the number of deaths diminished significantly after this point. 5 Brigade remained in Matabeleland for the rest of 1983, but changed strategy, increasing the proportion of beatings in relation to killings, and taking a more secretive approach to the disposing

of bodies. Diplomats asked occasional questions of their contacts, and sent occasional reports home on the matter, but did nothing else.

There's a couple of key points to make here about Mugabe's behaviour. First, despite his aggressive and unyielding public attitude, he showed himself to be privately sensitive to external pressure. Some of this seems to have been fear of exposure for what he knew to be crimes under international law. There were also things like the problems that would be created if the British removed military assistance or if the Americans withdrew financial aid. The government was overspending and was already knocking on the IMF's door for assistance.

A second key point is that 1983 taught Mugabe he could beat and kill Zimbabweans, and nobody would do anything, as long he kept the violence below a certain threshold—or appeared to keep it that way. In this respect, he had understood the position of Western countries correctly—even if those countries did not articulate their stance in such unvarnished terms. In other words, Western powers had made a decision that political violence would not produce a crisis point in their relations with the Zanu-PF government unless such violence involved extensive killings over a sustained period. I'll talk about the reasons for that in a minute.

The events of 1984 demonstrated the newly-established relational dynamics between Mugabe and the West. The nature of 5 Brigade's violence in Mat South mirrored the more discreet operations that had occurred in Mat North from March 1983. More of the violence was concentrated in hidden enclaves, such as Bhalagwe, and the bodies of those who died were taken away at night and thrown down mine shafts. The denial of food, which had formed part of ZNA operations in 1982 and 1983, now became a centrepiece of the strategy. Liquidation through starvation brought with it a greater degree of plausible deniability. The intention was that people would die alone at their homesteads from purportedly natural causes, with the numbers remaining unknown—and that's precisely what happened.

The lethargy of the Western response in 1984 is striking, particularly given the redeployment of the same unit that had so recently slaughtered thousands in Matabeleland North. Certainly, others were ready for the likelihood that atrocities were about to recur. The Catholics had made special preparations to gather information, and Zapu, too, began to blow the whistle as early as January. It was only when mass starvation became a possibility that serious consideration was given to approaching the government. The Americans were the most forthright, speaking to Mnangagwa and others in government about the food blockade during March. The British, after downplaying the severity of the situation, began to speak privately on the matter in late March when a rash of international press reporting on Mat South occurred. Most of the others were still talking among themselves about whether to speak up when the government lifted the curfew and the worst of the food embargo on 9 April.

Mugabe's decision to wind things back seems to have come from a combination of (1) increasing international press reporting (2) pressure from the Catholic church, including a meeting with Bishop Karlen and others on 6 April, and (3) American insistence that 30,000 tonnes of food aid for Zimbabwe would not be delivered unless there was a guarantee that some of it would go to Mat South.

A crude summary of the response of Western governments to Gukurahundi during 1983 and 1984 might be as follows: rapid awareness that atrocities were occurring; slow movement toward their own investigations; reluctant and late representations to government—representations which

nevertheless had an impact—and then a sigh of relief and no further action when 5 Brigade activities continued at a lower level.

So what are the reasons for why Western countries were, on the whole, so reluctant to damage their relationship with the Mugabe government by making rapid and forceful interventions over the atrocities?

This is a pretty complex question, but I'm going to highlight the following five reasons:

(1) Mugabe had adopted an independent foreign policy, choosing not to align Zimbabwe with the Communist bloc—and the Western powers wanted to keep it that way. A member of the British Foreign Office put it this way when the controversy over Gukurahundi blew up in 1983: 'There was a British concern that if the UK showed any less than full confidence in Mugabe, he might move much further away from the West and closer to the Soviet Union and its satellites such as North Korea.' Likewise, the US analysis at the same point was this: 'Our policy towards Zimbabwe since independence was to build upon the constructive role we played in support of the British and the independence process and upon the basic anti-Soviet animus of Mugabe and Zanu … to cement good relations between us.'

(2) Western countries wanted Zimbabwe to be regarded as a successful, capitalist, multiracial experiment, so that this would encourage the ANC and the whites to negotiate a similar solution in South Africa. A rupture between the Zanu-PF government and the West—and, for example, an associated exodus of the white community from Zimbabwe, along with an economic collapse—would undermine the attempt to hold up the country as a shining light. When reflecting on the tumultuous events of early 1983, the Canadians put it this way in May: '[Our] interests in Zimbabwe remain unchanged. Zimbabwe … has not ceased to be [the] hope for multiracial, democratic economic development which could be [a] model for Africa and for [the] even more vexing issue of [the] future development of [the Republic of South Africa] … [We must] continue to offer all possible support and attempt to steer Zimbabwe in [the] right direction.'

(3) Zimbabwe was seen as a possible or actual economic partner. The British had £800 million of investment in Zimbabwe and had done £120 million pounds worth of trade with Zimbabwe in 1982. Others, like the Canadians, explicitly referred to Zimbabwe's trade potential when discussing how to manage the problems caused by Gukurahundi.

(4) Britain was the leading external power in Zimbabwe, and its international prestige was bound up with the success of the Zanu-PF government. The British expectation during the Lancaster House negotiations and the elections of 1980 was that the independence process was likely to be a disaster. They were surprised that the war didn't restart, and that Mugabe took a moderate approach toward the economy and the whites. And the British had also received a lot of kudos in Africa and further afield. They referred to this as 'Lancaster House prestige'—that's in a document—and they wanted to believe that Matabeleland was a brief anomaly. Moreover, the Gukurahundi hadn't impacted Mashonaland, or the economy, or the whites—and given that these were some of the key metrics by which they measured Mugabe's behaviour, they were able to hang on to the fiction that he was a moderate.

(5) A number of key individuals in the diplomatic community became emotionally involved with Mugabe and Zanu-PF. They saw Zanu ministers all the time, they socialised with them after

hours, their wives were friends with Zanu wives, and they didn't travel much outside Harare. Some examples are Robin Byatt, the British High Commissioner, Colin Shortis, the head of the British military assistance program, and Jeremy Hearder, the Australian High Commissioner. All three had a tendency to downplay reports of the atrocities, to react slowly, and to instinctively take the government's side, often swallowing Zanu-PF propaganda hook, line and sinker. There's a standard joke in diplomatic circles about people who become too involved with the host government—namely, that our ambassador is no longer representing us, he's now representing the foreign government to us. And there's a strong sense in which people like this trio became Zimbabwe's representatives to Britain or Australia, rather than vice versa. Some examples of the tendencies I've mentioned: In Hearder's case, when Nkomo fled the country to Botswana, he wrote to Canberra that it was urgent for Mugabe to present his own version of events so as to counter the negative publicity. Two days later, when Western heads of mission met to discuss the possibility of coordinated representations, Hearder said he had no instructions to make an approach. In fact, he had already been told by his foreign ministry nine days earlier to seek an appointment with a Zanu minister. He eventually got around to it on 16 March. In the middle of the year, when there were still reports of atrocities, including the burning of 22 people in a hut in Lupane, Hearder wrote: 'It is difficult to determine the truth of the allegations at this stage. To say that thousands have been killed since January sounds exaggerated. The general impression that I have from recent contacts … is that the military situation was better than it had been, but was still unsatisfactory.' In March 1984, when the food embargo was operating in Mat South, Hearder paid his farewell call on Mugabe prior to leaving Zimbabwe, but did not raise Matabeleland. Instead, it was Mugabe who brought it up, telling Hearder that military commanders may occasionally have 'strayed a little'. Taking this as gospel truth, Hearder then relayed the message to headquarters. '[C]ontrary to instructions,' he wrote, 'security force commanders had taken things too far in denying food supplies to the area.' Pro-Zanu diplomats were not the only influence on their countries' foreign policies. As discussed, there were plenty of other factors in the equation. But there can be little doubt that they had an influence, and there are probably certain points where that influence was critical.

So, then, to conclude, what are we to make of the position of external players during the Gukurahundi? Should Western countries have done more? And what about the actions of Zapu's former allies, who went missing in action, or Zanu's allies, who actively assisted?

Well, those are not questions for historians. They are questions for citizens and policy-makers. It isn't the job of a historian to enter the moral debate or the policy debate on what should or shouldn't have been done. The job of a historian is to investigate what happened, and why it happened, not to get into what should have happened. Of course, as an individual, I've got views on those things, but when I'm speaking as a historian, I'm going to try to stay out of that and stick to the fundamental historical questions. So, it's over to you guys—and I hope that what you've heard today will help provide some the data you need to have an informed debate. Thank you.