

Jakaya Kikwete 'SADC cannot abandon Zimbabwe'

Barely 24 hours after the SADC landmark summit in Tanzania on 29 March which asked the West to lift "all forms of sanctions against Zimbabwe", the Tanzanian president, Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete, (pictured) spoke with our editor, **Baffour Ankomah**, on Zimbabwe and the way forward. Here are excerpts:



Baffour: You have been to Europe twice in recent months. Did Zimbabwe come up in your discussions with European leaders?

President Kikwete: Oh yes, everywhere, everywhere! Zimbabwe is a big story of huge interest everywhere. There is a lot of dissatisfaction in Europe and beyond of what is going on in Zimbabwe, and they see President Mugabe as some kind of devil, somebody who shouldn't have been there, and they think that we in Africa should have done something to have him removed.

Even yesterday, I was talking to one European journalist after the summit who said to me: "But Mugabe is still there!" I said, "Yes, but the SADC meeting was not about removing Mugabe. [Laughs]." There is a lot of this all the time. I have been to the US, I have been to Britain, I have been to the Nordic countries, everywhere you go, Mugabe and Zimbabwe become a major issue of discussion.

Baffour: Do they ever talk about their own economic sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe which are making the economy implode and the country go down?

Kikwete: Of course they say they have not imposed economic sanctions; they say "targeted sanctions", targeting the leadership.

Baffour: But you know that is not true. You know the economic sanctions prevent Zimbabwe from borrowing on the international market, and Zimbabwe can't get debt cancellation, aid, budgetary support or credits like Tanzania, Ghana and Nigeria...

Kikwete [cuts in]: I know, I know, I know. We have always had differences with the international community. They want us to join in the chorus of open condemnation of Zimbabwe. But we have been saying: "Fine, you can condemn when something is not going right, but our approach has been 'let's talk about the issues'."

We have always been trying to engage with President Mugabe and yesterday's summit was the culmination of the whole process, where we seriously discussed the issues involved. The discussions inside the closed sessions were very frank on the things that we think the Zimbabwean government is not doing right, and our view on what could be done right; and also on the things that we think the opposition is not doing right and what could be done right.

But at the end of it all, our conclusion has been accusation and counter-accusation, confrontation and counter-confrontation is not the answer. Because if confrontation is the

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answer, what you must simply do is to arm the opposition so that they will be able to better confront the government. The government, on the other hand, will also continue to arm itself so that it can better confront the opposition. But that is not the answer.

The answer is dialogue. The government and the opposition have differences, and these differences are not such that they cannot be sorted out at the roundtable. So this is the position that the SADC took and we agreed that President Thabo Mbeki will take the initiative.

Okay, we know that the opposition and the West have been saying that President Mbeki's "quiet diplomacy has failed, it is a policy for doing nothing". Well, we beg to differ, because in mediation the first thing is "do the parties have confidence in the mediator?" It appears in the Zimbabwean setting that both sides have confidence in President Mbeki, and this is the good thing about it all. We think President Mbeki will be able to help.

So what are they going to discuss? They will discuss their differences, but also how to get to a situation in Zimbabwe where democratic dispensations function, how to get to free and fair elections – elections are due next year, it is only 12 months from now, so they have to seriously talk about it, and other issues?

Both the government and the opposition are going to present their views, and both will react to the opposing views. At the end of the day, we will come up with an arrangement acceptable to both sides. President Mbeki is going to be the point man for this, but SADC is the owner of this process and it has entrusted a troika for which I am the chair to work with President Mbeki who will be reporting to us about the progress of the dialogue,

and from time to time we will also be visiting Zimbabwe to see for ourselves what is going on there. So I am confident.

Of course, there are those who thought the summit should have discussed the removal of President Mugabe. Well, I told one of them, removing Mugabe was not on the agenda. The objective has always been how do we help Zimbabwe? Legally Mugabe is the president until the next elections.

The issue is that there are political, diplomatic and economic difficulties in Zimbabwe. The economic problems are very acute, I don't know any country on the continent that has gone through serious economic difficulties as Zimbabwe has. We had our share of economic difficulties in Tanzania but never has inflation reached 1,750%. The highest inflation we had here was about 35%, which was too high for us. But at 1,750%, it means you have to have a sack of money to buy an egg in a supermarket. It is that bad.

So, we will try to assist the Zimbabwe process, and if we get the cooperation of the opposition to work with President Mbeki, I am sure we will be able to help our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe to overcome their present difficulties.

Baffour: When you went to Zimbabwe recently, it was interpreted in the British media that you had gone to Harare to read President Mugabe the riot act. Is that what happened?

Kikwete: No, no! Again it is the perception. But what is it that you want to see happen in Zimbabwe? We, as SADC, want to see a peaceful Zimbabwe, a stable Zimbabwe. We want a functioning democracy in Zimbabwe. There are problems now. Can these problems be sorted out by me going to see President Mugabe and reading him the riot act?

Baffour: That is how the British media interprets it.

Kikwete: But what happens thereafter? If it is a matter of riot acts, the more powerful nations have read riot acts to Zimbabwe many times and the situation has not changed. So, our approach is different, our approach is to get involved with the parties, bring them together, sit down with them, and let them talk about their problems. We will be there to help them, we will be there to facilitate, so that at the end of the day they will agree that "these are our problems and this is the way out".

President Kikwete: "Zimbabwe is a big story of huge interest everywhere... [Western] leaders see Mugabe as somebody who shouldn't have been there, and that we in Africa should have done something to have him removed"



After they have agreed on the parameters, they will then go back to their country and try to implement what they have agreed. We will be there to help if we are needed. If they are capable of doing it themselves, well and good, they will simply do it. We think this is the best approach.

So I went to Zimbabwe to get a briefing of what was happening. I duly got the briefing, and we agreed on a set of measures to do, and yesterday's summit was the culmination of that process which I started. At the end of the day, you need the larger SADC, you want everybody to get involved, so that there will be many hands trying to help the process in Zimbabwe. And that was the summit we had yesterday. What is important now is for us to follow up, which is what President Mbeki is going to do.

We have also given ourselves a number of assignments: the SADC executive secretary is going to look at the economic situation in Zimbabwe and come up with proposals on what needs to be done. Of course, there are things we can do within the region to help Zimbabwe, and there are things that we will depend on the international community, international financial institutions, and the other developing nations to help.

Baffour: How are you going to convince the international community to lift the sanctions against Zimbabwe, because in your communiqué you mentioned "all forms of sanctions". With the punitive Zimbabwe Democracy Act imposed by the Americans still in place, how are you going to get

the international financial institutions to give Zimbabwe the same treatment as they give to the other countries?

Kikwete: We know it will take time. But we need to send that message across. Isolation, which is the strategy that has been adopted by the Western countries and their allies, will work only, in fact its effectiveness depends on submission. You isolate countries to force them to submit. This is the idea. But how long will it take for Zimbabwe to submit?

Baffour: Perhaps they think that if the economy can be tweaked in such a way that inflation goes up to 3,000 or 5,000%, the people will come into the streets and demand that President Mugabe must go. It is the same template they have used everywhere they want regime change.

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Kikwete: Of course this is the assumption, but it is not a one-plus-one equals two. Our societies are different. Subsistence peasants have very little interaction with the world outside their farms or homesteads. It is only when they go to hospital, and people don't fall sick everyday, that they may have something to do with government institutions. My aunt (the younger sister of my late father who is now 91), she has never been to any hospital. I fall sick, but she doesn't. Barring accidents, I have never bothered to take her to any hospital because she doesn't fall sick. Of course, you may say this is a rare case.

But that is the situation we have in Africa. Under normal circumstances, to think that this Masai roaming the plains with his cattle is going to go into the streets because you have isolated the government of Tanzania, he doesn't give a damn! All he needs from the government is to allow him to take his cattle to the market. He finds beauty

in having a large herd of cattle; he doesn't want to have anything with street protests.

Baffour: But they are always looking to get the urban population to go into the streets.

Kikwete: Yes, isolation may work in urban areas, but the rural population anywhere in Africa far outnumbers the urban population. Isolation may work in urban areas but will never work in rural areas. And this is precisely what happens – you go to elections tomorrow, the government loses in urban areas but the rural areas continue to vote for it, and the government remains in power.

So I think the best way is to look at the issues, bring them to the negotiating table, and not wait until the government submits to isolation. It may take many years, and during these many years, so many people would have suffered.

That is why I said to one journalist yesterday after the summit: "Let's see what comes out of this process", and he said: "Oh, you are again adopting a wait-and-see policy". I said: "It's not wait and see, we've already started the process and you need to give it time." Of course it is guided optimism, but I am sure that some good will come out of this initiative.

Baffour: I looked at your communiqué yesterday and something curious caught my attention. You "recalled that [a] free, fair and democratic presidential election [was] held in 2002 in Zimbabwe". But the opposition MDC, Britain, America and their allies all say the election was rigged. So who is telling the truth: the SADC or the MDC and its Western allies?

Kikwete: Well, the SADC sent its team to Zimbabwe to observe and monitor the election. And their conclusion was: "It was free, fair and democratic." This is the basis, but that is beside the point. The issue now is we, the SADC, are trying to move from here to the next stage, and I am confident that we will get there.


The important thing has been to have frank discussions with President Mugabe, which we've been able to do this time, and get into a kind of understanding, because the situation in Zimbabwe has been a landmark. So that's where my appeal has always been: Let's all work together to help the emerging process until it succeeds.

Baffour: I would like to refer you to a very important section of your maiden speech

in parliament on 30 December 2005, nine days after your inauguration as president, which is quite pertinent to the Zimbabwean situation. You promised that your government would do all it could to improve inter-party dialogue and cooperation. You guaranteed each party the right to develop and propagate its policies, but you added a very important proviso: "I do not expect any party to have policies that are harmful to national unity and concord." Though your government would respect and protect civil and political rights and freedom, you said this would only be to the extent that political rights and freedom did not undermine national peace, security, unity and concord. "True freedom is not without limits," you added. "Limitless freedom is anarchy. That will not be allowed during my watch." But this is exactly what is happening in Zimbabwe or what some people would want to see happen there! In any nation under siege by foreign powers, the opposition helps the government to break the siege. In Zimbabwe it is the other way round. Is this why the SADC "reaffirmed its solidarity with the government and people of Zimbabwe", and did not condemn the recent beating of opposition leaders by the Zimbabwean police?

President Kikwete: "Maybe there isn't much interest in Congo, where two million people have died, as it is in Zimbabwe. That surprises me too"





Kikwete: No, no, no. It shouldn't be interpreted that way. What we simply said is this: "SADC cannot abandon Zimbabwe. We cannot abandon the people of Zimbabwe." There are others who want to isolate Zimbabwe. That is tantamount to abandoning Zimbabwe. But we say we cannot abandon the people of Zimbabwe. We have solidarity with the people of Zimbabwe. We work together with the people of Zimbabwe. We will try to help them to sort out their problems. That is the loaded meaning of that phrase.

Baffour: But in your maiden speech, you talked about "limitless freedom" and "anarchy" and you said that would not be allowed under your watch. And "limitless freedom" and "anarchy" appears to be what some people want in Zimbabwe. If elections are being held next year, why can't the opposition wait and if they are elected, they come into government? Why do they want to take power now via some backdoor coup and street protests? Why can't they wait till the elections, and if this man they so revile, who they claim has run the economy and country down, have his day with the electors? If he is as bad as they say, the electorate will throw him out and put the opposition in. Why do they want street protests now?

Kikwete: Of course I cannot pretend to be an expert on Zimbabwe and the opposition. I don't know, I don't really know. But the point you are making here is that there is freedom, but it should not be seen as the freedom to do anything and everything even if these things are harmful. We are putting across the same message, that we have

freedom but we cannot give anybody the freedom to demolish the country and say it is my freedom to do so.

The other day I was very cross. There was an advert on Tanzanian TV and somebody was hiding under the guise of the right to freedom of speech to say that for him, he enjoys sex best without a condom. So I took him and the TV station on, and said: "Look, this is wrong; we are fighting against HIV/Aids which is a national killer. Of course we respect individual freedoms but this cannot be an advert on TV. It sends out the wrong signals. Please get it off air." And they removed it.

But somebody would accuse me of infringing individual freedoms. Well, this advert was not in the national interest! The HIV infection rate is high in this country – 7%, and we are fighting to bring it down. We are

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saying "abstain, be faithful, use condoms". The last thing I would expect to see on TV is somebody advocating "don't use condoms". I said "this thing is not acceptable, it is going to kill people".

So freedom cannot be limitless. There must be certain limits. There are some things we should be able to say it is your freedom, but please we've had enough.

Baffour: In the SADC communiqué, you "appealed to Britain to honour its compensation obligations with regard to land reform made at Lancaster House" 28 years ago. But President Mugabe's government has already taken the land and redistributed it. So why should Britain pay any more compensation, and for which land?

Kikwete: Have they taken all the land? I am not sure.

Baffour: As we speak, the white farmers who didn't want to share their land and stay are

gone, those who wanted to stay have stayed, and their land has been redistributed. So which land should Britain pay for again?

Kikwete: Well, we think there is still that obligation. On one of my recent trips to Europe, I had discussions about it in Britain, and they gave me the impression that Britain has to honour its compensation obligations.

Baffour: Are they not saying the land has already been taken from their people, and thus there is nothing more to pay for?

Kikwete: That is not the perception I discerned from the British government.

Baffour: Let me take you to DR Congo, because yesterday you also talked about Congo, and there is something there which is common to what is happening in Zimbabwe. You said yesterday that 100 people had been killed and 200 injured in three days of fighting in DR Congo. And yet, we don't see the international community and their media jump mad about Congo as they do, or are doing, about Zimbabwe. Do you and your SADC colleagues find it shocking that 100 people can die in Congo and it doesn't register on the moral compass of the West and yet they jump mad about Zimbabwe?

Kikwete: Of course, it is something interesting, something really interesting. But maybe there isn't much interest in Congo as it is in Zimbabwe. That surprises me too.

Baffour: Imagine 100 people being killed in Zimbabwe in a matter of three days! The whole world will stop, wouldn't it?

Kikwete: Two million people died in Congo!

Baffour: And it did not register on the world's moral compass!

Kikwete: Two million people have died in Congo (1996-2005) during the wars of recent years.

Baffour: Do you, as our leaders, when you do meet these people who claim to love us so much, do you ask them: "Why do you focus on one African country where say 10 people have died, but don't feel the same passion about Congo where two million people have died? And we are the same Africans, same people, why?"

Kikwete: Well, you know, these are some of those puzzles. But that is the reality on the ground. ■ NA