

President Obama leads US drive to topple Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe

By [Global Research](#)

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(Jon Hrusa/EPA)

China and Russia have blocked previous moves against Robert Mugabe in the UN

Tim Reid in Washington and Jonathan Clayton in Johannesburg

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President Obama wants a fresh approach to toppling Robert Mugabe and is discussing with aides an unprecedented, US-led diplomatic push to get tough new UN sanctions imposed against the Zimbabwe regime, The Times has learned.

During talks Mr Obama has had with his top Africa advisers in recent weeks, the central idea they focused on was taking the issue of Zimbabwe before the UN Security Council, but for the first time to combine such a move with an intense diplomatic effort to persuade Russia and China not to block the initiative.

According to a senior aide present at the discussions, the goal of taking the issue of Zimbabwe to the Security Council would be to pass a series of "strong" sanctions, including a ban on arms sales and foreign investment. They also want to expand significantly the number of ruling Zanu-PF party officials subject to sanctions.

Last July, after Mr Mugabe was accused of rigging the elections to stay in power, China and Russia, who have significant financial interests in Zimbabwe, vetoed moves to impose UN sanctions. Mr Obama and his aides believe that, with the growing international outcry over conditions there and the devastating loss of life from the cholera outbreak, Beijing and Moscow can now be persuaded at the very least to abstain when the issue of sanctions comes to another vote.

"It is predicated on China and Russia going along and this Administration will certainly undertake a new round of constructive diplomacy with Russia and China on a whole range of options," the aide told The Times. "It will depend on an arc of Obama diplomacy in the coming months."

Pressure on China and Russia will also be coordinated with Britain and France at the UN. "To get even an abstention would be a tremendous victory," the aide said.

A key figure in any new approach will be Susan Rice, Mr Obama's UN ambassador, who was Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in the Clinton administration and is a Zimbabwe expert.

"Susan is extremely aware of what is going on in Zimbabwe and she feels very strongly that there is a tremendous miscarriage of justice in that country and that it has to end," the aide said. "Once she has her feet on the ground she is going to turn her attention to this issue."

During her Senate confirmation hearings earlier this month, Dr Rice said that the US would take a leading role at the UN in tackling the "thorny challenges of peacekeeping in the context of Darfur and Congo and the autocracy in the context of Zimbabwe".

Mr Obama and Dr Rice are also understood to be anxious that Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, does not agree to a power-sharing deal with Mr Mugabe that has been under negotiation for weeks.

They and other Western diplomats were encouraged by the collapse of talks yesterday that regional leaders had convened to make progress on the main issues blocking the formation of a unity government. Mr Tsvangirai was offered the option of sharing with Mr Mugabe, but the opposition leader refused to accept because he was not given control over the Zimbabwean police – the main tool of oppression in the country.

Leaders of the MDC reacted angrily to claims by southern African mediators that an agreement had been brokered to form a unity government by the middle of next month. They accused the Southern African Development Community (SADC) of trying to railroad them into a deal that kept the main levers of power in Mr Mugabe's hands.

The US and Britain are anxious that Mr Tsvangirai does not weaken and sign up to a power-sharing deal because the failure to reach an accord helps clear the way to take the issue back to the UN. Zimbabwe will again be discussed at the African Union's annual summit this week, in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital, but little progress is expected to be made.

"We have leverage over Russia and we are working on China," one diplomat told The Times. "If SADC talks fail, then the African Union fails, then the deal is dead in the water and the way is clear to take the issue back to the Security Council."

Significantly South Africa, which is viewed by Western diplomats as an "enabler" of Mr Mugabe and unwilling to take him on, has stepped down as one of the Security Council's non-permanent members and can no longer lobby China and Russia for an alternative approach, which it has done in the past.

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