

Zimbabwe churches apologize for not helping nation  
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By ANGUS SHAW, Associated Press

HARARE, Zimbabwe (July 17, 10:05 a.m. ADT) - In a stunning appeal for forgiveness, Zimbabwe's Christian churches apologized Thursday for not doing enough to stop political violence, hunger and the economic collapse of the nation.

Western governments and human rights groups blame the chaos embroiling the once-prosperous and stable southern African country on the increasingly autocratic and violent rule of President Robert Mugabe.

The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, which represents all Christian denominations in the heavily Christian country, said it had watched passively as poverty worsened, leaving children begging on the streets. The council includes about a dozen denominations comprising more than half the population of more than 12 million people.

The council also said it stood by amid the collapse of state health and education services and widening political divisions in the nation.

"We have, with our own eyes, watched as violence, rape, intimidation, harassment and various forms of torture have ravaged the nation. Yet some perpetrators have been set free," the council said in a statement.

"We have been witness to and buried our people who have starved to death due to food shortages ... while we have continued to pray, we have not been moved to action. We as a council apologize to the people of Zimbabwe for not having done enough at a time when the nation looked to us for guidance," it said.

The church leaders, who released the statement after their annual meeting, said they planned to pressure the government to allow them to import food aid while also lobbying for economic reforms and the resumption of talks between the ruling party and the opposition.

The meeting was concluded July 2, but the statement was only released Thursday, after some "soul searching," said a church official who declined to be named.

Mugabe, a self-avowed Roman Catholic, has repeatedly criticized churches for meddling in political affairs.

Zimbabwe has been locked in a political stalemate since Mugabe was named the victor in last year's disputed presidential elections. Many international monitors and human rights groups said the poll was heavily swayed by the

intimidation of ruling party militants and by electoral irregularities.

The opposition Movement for Democratic Change has refused to recognize the results.

In a separate statement Thursday, the Catholic Bishops Conference, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and the Evangelical Fellowship of other Christian groups said they were united in their resolve to pursue "the route of a peaceful, mediated settlement which will bring normalcy to our nation."

The council of churches also said it planned to set up a task force to investigate the National Youth Service, widely accused of being used as a ruling party militia engaged in the violent intimidation of Mugabe's opponents.

Zimbabwe is suffering its worst economic crisis since independence in 1980. Official inflation rose last month to 300 percent, though unofficial estimates taking into account new, massive price hikes for food and a thriving black market in scarce food and gasoline put it closer to 600 percent.

The U.N. World Food Program estimates food shortages will leave 5.5 million out of about 12 million Zimbabweans in need of emergency food aid this year.

Part of the crisis is blamed on a state program that seized thousands of white-owned commercial farms for redistribution to black settlers. Many prime farms went to politicians and ruling party cronies and were left idle amid a devastating drought.

Hard currency earnings from tobacco, tourism and mining have collapsed and investment and foreign aid have dried up in protest of human rights abuses and disputed presidential elections last year.