

Statement of the Presidency: Media reports on Mr. Morgan Tsvangirai's supposed letter to President Thabo Mbeki

The Presidency has noted ongoing media reports of a letter supposedly sent to President Thabo Mbeki by Zimbabwean Movement of Democratic Change (MDC) leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, on May 13 2008. Regarding these reports, the Presidency reiterates that President Thabo Mbeki has not received any such letter from Mr Tsvangirai. Nor has any official in the Presidency or the South African government received any such letter from any member of the MDC.

Furthermore, the MDC has never discussed the letter with the Facilitation Team, the Presidency or any department of government and the MDC at any time.

It is worth noting that whereas some newspapers claim to have "assurances" of the letter's acknowledgement of receipt by the Presidency from the MDC, no newspaper has, as yet, attributed such "assurances" to any official of the MDC.

In light of the fact that the Presidency did not receive the letter and in the absence of any authentication by media entities which have reported about it, the logical conclusion is that there is no such a letter.

We note further that since the commencement of the facilitation process, the Presidency, and government have, on numerous occasions, made corrections to false media reports that have been industriously fed to an otherwise vigilant media.

On August 15, 2007, the Presidency issued a statement correcting media reports which claimed that President Mbeki would present a report at the SADC Heads of State and Government Summit held in Lusaka, Zambia on August 16 to 17, 2007, which would blame Britain for Zimbabwe's political and economic challenges.

The statement made it clear that the Presidency was not aware of any such report and that, if any such existed at all, certainly, "it was not authored by the Government of the Republic of South Africa."

Regrettably, the media did not take our statement seriously and, apparently without further qualms, persisted in attributing the report to President Mbeki. Our investigations later revealed that the news report originated from a news agency stringer, based in Lusaka, a stringer who had been handed a copy of "the" report and then deliberately, fallaciously, attributed it to President Mbeki instead of to its real author. The news agency later retracted its report, albeit in no more than three paragraphs. None of the other local and international media who reported on the matter retracted, nor offered any apology.

Again on September 14, 2007, the Presidency issued a statement in which we rebutted the falsehood which some media reported at length to the effect that "the South African Government ... has been secretly working to remove [President Robert Mugabe] from power" through "lobbying for sustained international pressure to bear on the Mugabe regime."

This year, as in the previous year, it appears as though there exists a disinformation campaign whereby all manner of fabrications are fed to the media.

In April, there was a sustained attempt to present President Mbeki's answer to a specific question about whether at that point (April 12) the election process in Zimbabwe constituted a crisis. Both the context of the question and the detail of the reply were ignored; resulting in the impression that the President was oblivious to the challenges in Zimbabwe.

As recently as last month, the Presidency and the Ministry of Defence have had to rebut allegations (reported in the media) that President Mbeki ordered Deputy Defence Minister, Mluleki George, to

refuel the An Yue Jiang; the Chinese parastatal-owned vessel which docked in Durban in April carrying arms to Zimbabwe, amongst other variously destined goods.

Though not all have been published, the Presidency has been the recipient of media inquiries of similar kind about Zimbabwe which some media seem to have pursued with precious little critical reflection. These include claims that either President Mbeki or Mrs [Zanele] Mbeki are supposed to be blood relatives of Mrs Grace Mugabe, the Zimbabwean President's wife.

Another such inquiry concerned the phantastical supposition that President Mbeki was arrested for arms and drug smuggling in Zimbabwe in 1982; "which is why," in the words of one journalist who recently sought comment, "he is so afraid of President Mugabe."

Yet another media inquiry appears to be somebody's perception of a State Secret that since the Zimbabwean elections, President Mugabe has been secretly residing at Mahlambandlopfu – the official residence of the South African President – for fear of reprisals in an impending military coup.

We cite these examples to illustrate the extent to which fabrications about the SADC mandated facilitation process are being given to the media. To what extent this is deliberate or coordinated, and what immediate or long-term local or international objectives might be served by it, is a matter for historians to unravel.

What is clear is that these fabrications are focusing on demonisation of the facilitation process with the intention to prevent the possibility for a solution to the challenges in Zimbabwe.

In this context, the media ought to remain vigilant by, amongst other ways, authenticating information as well as greater scrutiny of the motives of those who leak information.

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