

Nkomo Flees Zimbabwe

In a dramatic twist to his long and controversial political career, on March 8 Zimbabwe opposition PF-ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo fled into exile in Botswana after government troops raided his Bulawayo home, killing his chauffeur. The army sweep, part of a military campaign by Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF government against "dissident" former members of Nkomo's ZIPRA guerrilla forces, reportedly left two other people dead in the nation's second largest city. According to government sources in Harare, Nkomo's driver was slain after he pointed a pistol at an approaching army patrol, but Nkomo aides produced a blood-stained mattress which they said proved the chauffeur had been shot in bed.

After four secluded days in Botswana, Nkomo traveled on to London, where he charged Mugabe with plotting to kill him. Nkomo's return to exile follows months of deepening antagonism between Mugabe's ruling ZANU party and their erstwhile coalition government partners in ZAPU. Relations between the two nationalist parties, never good, flared into open confrontation in February 1982, after arms caches were discovered on ZAPU-owned farms. The revelations led to the arrest of seven top ZAPU and ZIPRA officials on treason charges (see related article), and Nkomo's expulsion from the government.

These animosities have been compounded by ZANU charges that ZAPU is directing the "dissidents" in their anti-government guerrilla campaign centered in the western province of Matabeleland (see *Southern Africa*, March 1983). The dissidents have attacked and destroyed government development projects, robbed banks and stores,



ZAPU leader Joshua Nkomo. His return to exile marks a new chapter in his turbulent political career.

and shot dozens of civilians in recent months. And while the dissidents have certainly been waging a harsh campaign, ZAPU has responded with accusations of brutality against the government security forces sent to Matabeleland to crush the dissidents.

Mugabe has denied any designs on the opposition leader's life, saying Nkomo is "welcome home" at any time. But Nkomo has dismissed Mugabe's offer with the comment, "that's very nice, but his boys almost got me switched off." He has demanded a meeting with Zimbabwean officials in London, as well as personal guarantees of his safety.

Atrocities Reported

In recent months, ZAPU statements and Western press reports about the government's anti-dissident campaign have been filled with

horror stories reminiscent of the worst excesses of the Ian Smith regime—of government security forces cutting a brutal swathe through rural villages, burning huts and crops, cutting off and seizing food supplies, summarily executing villagers suspected of sympathizing with the dissidents, interning scores of ZAPU members in hastily constructed detention camps, and sending hundreds of refugees fleeing Matabeleland into Zambia and Botswana. Estimates of the number of civilians killed by the army have run as high as 3,000, and a number of relief and church organizations, including some who strongly supported the liberation struggle, have submitted detailed reports of army atrocities to the government.

The reports were sharply denied by Minister of State for Defense Dr.

Sydney Sekeramayi, who accused ZAPU and the foreign press of malicious distortions. "Nkomo has made wild allegations about so-called atrocities being perpetrated by the Zimbabwe National Army against the civilian population," Sekeramayi said. "The security forces are operating and will always operate within the confines of the law . . . If some innocent people get caught up it is regrettable, but it's not a Zimbabwean peculiarity that in a conflict situation some innocent civilians regrettably fall victim."

But government denials notwithstanding, the volume of detailed ac-

counts of abuses from previously reliable sources suggests that the army has gone beyond the "rough and ready" tactics Harare concedes are being employed in Matabeleland to a deliberate policy of intimidating the local populace. These charges have centered on the Fifth Brigade, a newly created and specially trained Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) unit composed almost exclusively of ZANU ex-guerrillas considered to be intensely loyal to ZANU and Mugabe personally. Nkomo described the unit as a "political and tribal army come to wipe out the Ndebeles." Sekeramayi termed Nkomo's characterization

"contemptible mischief," and he demanded that Nkomo halt the dissidents' activities "before it is too late."

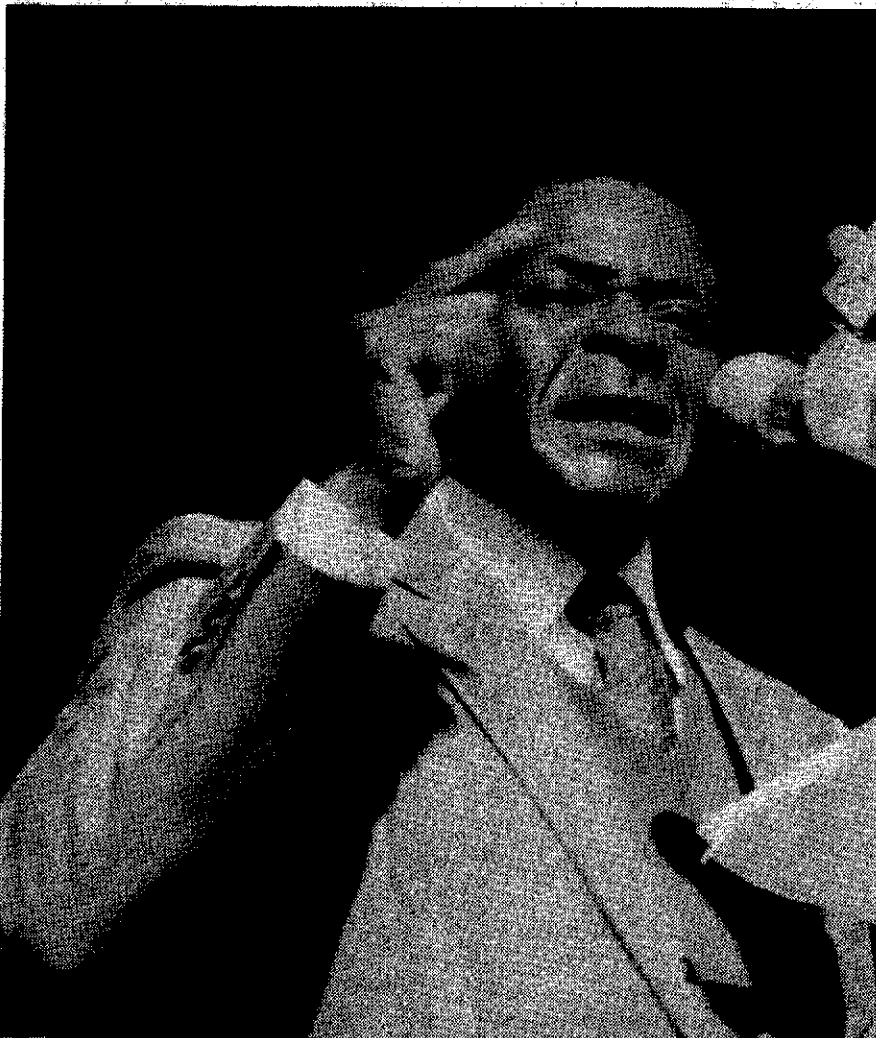
Reconciliation or Civil War?

It is open to question, however, how much influence Nkomo retains over the dissidents, especially after having left the country. Many former ZIPRA guerrillas are known to be unhappy with the moderate policies adopted by the national government, and with Nkomo's ineffectiveness in opposition. Many are reported to look to their former commanders, Lookout Masuku and Dumiso Dabengwa for leadership. The slow pace of land reform, the failure of the government to move against foreign capital, and what many perceive as a gradual purge of the left wings of both parties by their respective leaderships is far more likely to be at the heart of the dissident movement than any underlying ethnic tension.

Even if a formula can be reached for Nkomo's return to Zimbabwe and for some kind of reconciliation between the leaderships of both parties, the dissidents' problem is unlikely to fade away. Some reports have put the number of ex-ZIPRA deserters from the ZNA at over 4,000, with perhaps 1,000 of those presently involved in the western fighting. Other reports claim the dissidents have revived the old ZIPRA command structure from the days of the liberation struggle and are targeting white commercial farmers in their anti-government campaign. These reports received an added measure of credibility with the shooting deaths of five members of a white farming family in mid-March.

"The young men who have run away are trained people," one highly placed ZAPU official cautioned. "They have spent years fighting. They will cross the country to dig up the arms which they have buried and they will fight with them. We fought Smith because he was wrong," he continued. "Now we will fight Mugabe because he is wrong."

L.C.



Prime Minister Robert Mugabe. "We will finish the war Nkomo has started."

Penelope Lockridge