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Photo: President Robert Mugabe AP photo

The Fire This Time: Pan Africanism Comes to Harlem

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"In 1980 I came to Harlem to express the deep sense of gratitude and appreciation the people of Zimbabwe had for you because of the solidarity you had with them for two decades of struggle," Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe told an enthusiastic crowd at Mount Olivet Baptist Church September 7.

"Now, we say to you very warmly, 'Come home.' I said 'Come Home!' You can come home either to reside, to render service, or you can do [so] in moral and intellectual terms, as you continue to associate yourselves with our struggles."

The warm reception Mugabe received here came in sharp contrast to the frosty international gaze cast on his country in recent months. Since mid-February, landless blacks have invaded and occupied hundreds of white owned farms. Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party have since thrown governmental muscle behind the rebels, confiscating white-owned land, redistributing it to black farmers and drawing criticism from many sides.

Organized by the friends of Zimbabwe, an umbrella group comprising a number of activist organizations, Mugabe's Harlem visit attracted a crowd estimated at more than 1,000 people. They lined the block around Mount Olivet Church on 120th and Lennox Avenue, and were patted down and ushered into the church's cavernous hall by security men in khaki outfits.

"I want to hear the views of an African leader," said Frank Emerson, a retired transit worker who came up from Teaneck, New Jersey. "I want to

see how we Africans and African Americans – can be helpful to each other's causes, but more broadly, I believe in the human race as a whole, and how we can be helpful to one another."

"It's an excellent idea to invite him to Harlem," Emerson went on. "We need more leaders coming to Harlem. Harlem needs more recognition. Malcolm X, Paul Robeson, Jackie Robinson have spoken here and tried to bring people together."

Others came to denounce the event. Protesters, including a group calling itself the True Friends of Zimbabwe, weaved their way through vendors and stands selling T-shirts, books, incense, and African artifacts, distributing fliers that declared: "President Mugabe's a ruthless dictator and murderer who's...murdered opponents and potential leaders. Murdered innocent civilians by his army in the Matebeleland and Midland provinces."

Jesse Williams, 24, a member of the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade, also came to protest. "Mugabe has a stranglehold on Zimbabwe," he said. "ZANU-PF and ZAPU simply filled the boots of the colonial powers. There has been no transformation. If there was real reconciliation in 1980, there wouldn't be the land question. He's using the land issue to consolidate his power."

But the audience inside, which had already listened to hours of speeches before Mugabe arrived, reacted rapturously to the president's impassioned plea for pan-African solidarity – and to his fiery denunciation of Western meddling in Africa.

The evening's events began with the blessings of a babalao (holy man), who summoned the gods and poured drops of water in a cup in tribute to departed ancestors. After his blessing, dancers clad in colorful boobos and brilliant headwraps undulated to the sound of pounding drums at the foot of the stage.

Comrade Omowale Clay of the December 12th Movement served as master of ceremonies. "The program tonight is a militant one, not a bureaucratic one," proclaimed Clay. "This is not a time for peace, but a time for war."

"For years, the soil that blacks have sweated on has been taken away from us," Clay went on. "We face the same issues as our brothers across the Atlantic who are landless. No difference – sitting in this urban ghetto landless, locked-in, repressed. We come as a call to arms, not to be silent."

"When we invited Mugabe, we said 'You're not the only one with a land issue, we have one too. For years, they've been stealing our land from right beneath us.'"

Mount Olivet Church's pastor, Reverend Charles Curtis also spoke in support of Mugabe's plan for land redistribution: "I don't quite understand the moral conflict which seems to arise when indigenous people or African people take charge of their land."

The speakers who took the podium before Mugabe's arrival all strongly denounced the US Congress' plan to impose sanctions on the southern African state via the proposed Zimbabwe Democracy Act, which will freeze international and bilateral loans because of the ZANU-PF government's alleged "deliberate and systemic violence, intimidation and killings."

Professor Leonard Jeffries of the City University of New York led a chant of "Free the land!" noting how "Zimbabwe had reached out to black America," and saying that "if he's (Mugabe) a pariah, it means he's doing something right." The already uproarious audience erupted in loud cheers and applause when a door to the side of the stage opened and Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam and his entourage emerged. "We can't rely on any political party, or the good words of any politician, to get for us what we deserve, what we need," Farrakhan declared when he took the podium. "If we do not create a popular movement of our people, energized, organized, we will never extract from the government what we deserve." In reference to the proposed legislation, Farrakhan called for "mass mobilization to make sure that that bill does not pass in the Congress of the United States." When Mugabe finally took the stage, he did not disappoint. Speaking in slow, unmistakable terms, Mugabe excoriated Africa's former colonizers ("robbers") for interfering in Zimbabwe's domestic politics, blasting the pending legislation ("punitive actions"), and vowing to go ahead with "fast track" plans for land redistribution, without recompense: "If they make funds available, we will give their sons and daughters compensation. We cannot tax our own people, deprived as they are" to compensate the white farmers, "who are the grandsons of the robbers who deprived us."

Mugabe's address was steeped in pan-Africanist discourse, emphasizing the "oneness" of Africans in face of widespread racism. "Look at how whites stick together," he said. "What this teaches us is that we blacks must stick together, whether it is in America or in Africa." The Harlem appearance would be a high point of Mugabe's American visit. Just before his Mount Olivet speech, according to the Washington Post, Mugabe was served papers for a civil lawsuit brought by relatives of three people who were killed and a political opponent who says she was beaten, accusing him of human rights abuses. Filed in the US District Court in Manhattan, the lawsuit charges that Mugabe "has orchestrated a campaign of violence to keep his political party, ZANU-PF, in power," and seeks \$400 million in damages. (The lawsuit is filed under the Alien Tort Claims, a 211-year old US law originally intended to fight piracy.)

In a speech the following day at the UN Millennium Summit, however, Mugabe was just as intransigent, stating that developing countries in the new millennium would have to stand up to the master race, the master economy, and the master state: "If the new millennium like the last, remains an age of hegemonic empire and conquerors doing the same old things in new technological ways, then I'm afraid we in the developing countries will stand up and say 'Not again!'" Mugabe again denounced the reaction of Western nations to his land reform. "Their response has been staggering beyond description. My country, my government, my party and my own label have been labeled land grabbers, demonized, reviled and threatened with sanctions in the face of accusations of reverse racism," he said. "W.E.B. Du Bois must be turning in his grave, having thought the color line would disappear with the 20th century..." Perhaps anticipating the controversy Mugabe's visit might engender, Secretary General Kofi Annan organized a mini-summit at the UN – attended by the leaders of Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe – which press reports say was intended to give Mugabe "an escape route" from the land issue. According to The Cape Town Independent, Annan "gave Mugabe conditional support for his controversial land reform program but said Harare must first settle differences with Britain and other key Western donors who underwrite crucial aid to Zimbabwe."

Mugabe, however, has not reversed course or in anyway relented. His office dismissed the \$400 million dollar lawsuit as a "nonevent" and said the case would not affect the president. And he has remained defiant in the face of other troubles. Following a grenade attack on the headquarters of

the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (which won nearly half of all contested seats in the June parliamentary elections), the Zimbabwean police raided the party's headquarters and detained four officials – to the outrage of the international community and Zimbabwean activists. The state news agency reported that 240,000 black farm workers plan to sue Mugabe to demand compensation if the properties of their 3000 white employers are seized before November as planned. A few days ago the government newspaper, The Herald, published an updated list of farms to be confiscated under the state's plan for land reform, bringing the total number of farms to be seized to 2, 309.

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