A nation starves as Mugabe plans yet another lavish birthday bash

Selfish. Villagers were reportedly forced to contribute to the party.

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HARARE. Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe turned 92 on February 21 and will throw a massive birthday party today with a budget of close to $1m (about Shs3.3b).

For over a year, one of the longtime ruler's deputies has been living at one of the most expensive hotels in Harare with his wife and grandchildren, at the taxpayer's expense.

The extravagance could have created an impression that Zimbabwe was a self-sufficient country, but on February 8, President Mugabe's government sent out a begging bowl for $1.5 billion to feed a quarter of its population facing starvation this year.

Zimbabwe is one of the countries bearing the brunt of a severe drought induced by the El-Nino weather phenomenon, that has resulted in low rainfall and very high temperatures.

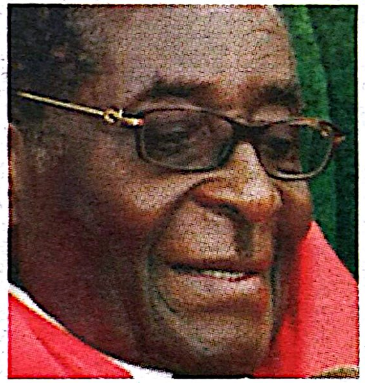
Vice president Emmerson Mnangagwa said 95 per cent of the country had received below 50 per cent of normal rains this season, resulting in massive crop failure.

Mr Mnangagwa said Zimbabwe needed urgent help from the international community, local businesses, churches and civil society to feed about three million vulnerable people.

The previous week, President Mugabe had declared a state of disaster in most parts of the country's rural areas due to the drought.

According to the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee (ZIMVAC), the country was facing a deficit of 650,000 tonnes of maize for human consumption and 350,000 for livestock, but those figures were considered to be very conservative by donors. ZIMVAC also noted that acute malnutrition in children had risen to 3.3 per cent in the previous season and that average household purchasing power, in terms of maize grain, dropped from 300kg last season to 244kg this year.

One of the major coalitions of donors – the ACT Alliance - has warned that the response to the crisis was lethargic due to the government's poor financial position and Zimbabwe's isolation by the international



community. "The current response is inadequate, and will get worse past March 2016 when the current response/interventions end," ACT Alliance said in a recent alert.

"According to WFP (World Food Programme), the current agricultural season is likely to be a lot worse than the 2014/15 season with 90 per cent chance of El-Nino induced drought.

"The national human food requirement deficit for the country is expected to surpass the 650,000 metric tonnes that the nation has struggled to meet under the current consumption season."

The donors said raising enough funds to feed Zimbabwe's starving population until March next year would be difficult.

"WFP has targeted to provide assistance to 800,000 people, but they still have a funding deficit of close to 50 per cent to meet that need," the ACT Alliance said.

"The major challenge is the lack of adequate maize to meet the affected vulnerable groups' needs, coupled with low budgets from government to the aid sector in Zimbabwe as well as donor pull out."

Zimbabwe has been struggling to feed its people since President Mugabe's government embarked on a violent land reform programme that displaced close to 4,000 white commercial farmers at the start of the millennium. The majority of the displaced farmers relocated to Zambia, which was now one of Zimbabwe's major grain suppliers. Zimbabweans were now reportedly crossing to Zambia to buy maize-meal.

One of the fierce critics of President Mugabe's agrarian reforms, Mr Eddie Cross, who is also an opposition legislator, said although the current crisis could be partly blamed on climate change, it was a manifestation of failed agrarian policies.

"On commercial farms, we have over 10,000 dams and in 1997 we had the capacity to irrigate 280,000 hectares of land in a dry season," Mr Cross wrote recently on his website.

"The dams are still there, most of them are still nearly full, but the farmers who managed the whole system and the equipment that made it possible, are all gone.

"This year only 60,000 tonnes of maize is expected from all commercial farms in the country."

Zimbabwe's main opposition party – the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) – also blames the agrarian reforms for the hunger crisis.

Land reform

"The Zanu-PF regime should take prompt measures to rectify the far-reaching deficiencies in its much talked about land reform programme," MDC said in a statement.

The mega birthday feast on Sunday would be hosted by one of the provinces worst hit by the drought.

Villagers in Masvingo Province were reportedly being forced to contribute to the party organised by the Soviet styled 21st February Movement.

A senator from Masvingo Province said hosting the birthday bash in the drought stricken area would be insensitive.

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