

Mugabe adamant to win 2008 elections

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By Cris Chinaka

Harare - Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe vowed on Wednesday to win next year's elections and said nobody could ever force him into exile.

"I want to say here that I am not going anywhere. Here I was born. Here I grew up and here I shall die and will be buried," he told veterans of the country's 1970s war of liberation, calling them the "torch bearers" of the elections.

"We are going to organise. We are going to win. But we want to win resoundingly."

'The war veterans have a covenant with Mugabe'

About 5 000 veterans of the independence war began marching hours earlier in support of Mugabe's candidacy in the presidential elections, disrupting traffic in a city plagued by food and fuel shortages and the world's highest inflation rate.

"The war veterans have a covenant with Mugabe. We will back you to the hilt," they chanted in the local Shona language. "They (the West) want to take our land, no no no, over our dead bodies."

"We will die with our president," read one placard. Another one said: "Mugabe be our candidate for 2008".

War veterans, who fought alongside members of the now ruling ZANU-PF, occupied many white-owned farms in 2000, often violently with Mugabe's backing. There are 35 000 war veterans in Zimbabwe.

Mugabe turned on Zimbabwe's white minority after voters rejected a new constitution that would have given him more power in a referendum in 2002, one of the controversial policies that his critics say has brought the country its his knees.

Analysts say he is now pursuing his classic strategy of trying to draw attention away from Zimbabwe's economic crisis by blaming Britain, the United States and Australia, which have imposed sanctions, for widespread hardships.

Mugabe was elected to a third six-year term as president in 2002 in elections western observers said were rigged, and his crackdown on the opposition and journalists increased his international isolation.

Zimbabwe's leading state-run Herald newspaper on Wednesday accused Australia, where the country's leading opposition figure Morgan Tsvangirai is visiting, of trying to oust Mugabe and urged the Zimbabwean government to expel Australian diplomats.

On Wednesday Mugabe suggested Tsvangirai had been "summoned" to Australia to receive financial aid ahead of 2008 elections.

"It does not matter how many millions they pour into their politics. This is our land, we will never let go," he said.

Mugabe, in power since independence from Britain in 1980, is seeking another five-year term in next year's presidential election. Victory would make him one of Africa's longest-serving rulers.

The former Marxist guerrilla hopes to push a bill through the ZANU-PF dominated parliament which would give him room to choose a successor if he were to retire. Parliamentary elections are also planned for next year.

If passed, the bill would allow the 83-year-old leader to step-down mid term to allow for a dignified exit and give him an opportunity to influence Zimbabwe's future, analysts say.

Mugabe also wants to give Zimbabweans a majority share of foreign companies, a move critics say would drain what little confidence is left in the battered economy.

The veterans sang for hours denouncing Western sanctions, which have failed to weaken Mugabe. The country's divided opposition, which has failed to challenge Mugabe, hopes an economic collapse will bring him down.

Mugabe is struggling to prevent economic collapse. But analysts say he remains strong on the political front, cracking down on the opposition. Mugabe denies allegations of human rights abuses.

Public pressure from Mugabe's Western foes has faded, giving him room to manoeuvre.

"For those who think we are cowards, we shall never retreat," said Mugabe. His credentials as a former liberation hero still makes him popular among southern African nations, who have been accused of being too soft on Mugabe.