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Prime Minister<sup>2</sup>

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

7 March, 1983

John Thur...

Zimbabwe

The Prime Minister may find it helpful to have a summary of recent developments in Zimbabwe. I shall be showing the Secretary of State a copy of this letter in tonight's box.

The (North Korean trained) Fifth Brigade have, as you know, moved into Matabeleland in some strength over the past two weeks. In the name of searching out dissidents, they have carried out a thorough and at times brutal campaign to cow Nkomo's Ndebele supporters. Atrocities on a substantial scale have undoubtedly been committed, and over 500 people may have been killed, including women and children. Details are still emerging. The killings appear to be continuing, though at a much lower level. The white community have been well treated.

Mugabe had clearly decided that the security position in Matabeleland had deteriorated to a point where it constituted a serious threat and could only be significantly improved by the tough use of military force and confrontation with Nkomo. His decision (we must assume it was his) was provoked by a rise in dissident activity over the last year, compounded by South African destabilisation and the easy refuge available to the dissidents in neighbouring countries. The seizure of the Western tourists (including two British) and the spate of killings by dissidents over Christmas have been taken as a public challenge to which a firm response has to be given. It also offered an opportunity to Mugabe to launch a strike against his long term rival.

There are signs that this tough approach is achieving Mugabe's immediate objective of clamping down on dissident activity. The white community generally are claiming to feel more secure than they have done for several months. The Minister of Defence told our High Commissioner that the current operations would come to an end last weekend (the sweep of Bulawayo black townships may therefore have been its final phase); after that the army would stand still in their present positions. So far the ex-ZAPU (Nkomo) elements in the army and in the Government have remained loyal.

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However, the Fifth Brigade's excesses, the harrassment of Nkomo and the arrest and trial of other ZAPU leaders are putting this loyalty under severe strain. There is an obvious danger of a backlash. At the worst, the situation could deteriorate into a complete polarisation between ZAPU and ZANU, a breakup of the amalgamated army, and a severe breakdown in law and order in Matabeleland with unrest perhaps spreading into other areas.

Mugabe will stick by his policies unless and until they have been proved wrong by events. According to the Minister of Defence, the Government intend to return to a policy of reconciliation (which was being actively pursued before the Christmas dissident killings), but are determined to deal with the dissidents first. Mugabe has shown in the past that he is unlikely to be moved by public criticism in the West, but he may listen to constructive and low-key advice. Our High Commissioner spoke robustly to the Minister of Defence on 4 March to express our concern at the excesses, to urge that the doctrine of minimum force should be applied and that the short-term military problem should not be solved in a way which will exacerbate the long-term political problem. Commander BMATT, General Shortis, is expecting to call on Mugabe shortly after the latter's return from the Non-Aligned Movement meeting in Delhi in about a week's time, and he will be making the same points.

We are preparing advice for the Prime Minister's use in the House which will be reaching you separately tomorrow morning.

*You are,*  
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