

# How the UN Covered Up a Cholera Epidemic in Zimbabwe

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Zimbabwe, a potential economic powerhouse ruined at the hands of one of the most restrictive and longest-tenured dictatorships on earth, is heading for a potential turning point. A mostly peaceful, [popular referendum](#) on March 16 approved a relatively progressive constitution that includes a theoretically strong bill of rights, and presidential elections will [likely be held](#) later in the year. But the current president is the 89-year-old Robert Mugabe, who took power in 1980 and has shown no subsequent appetite for giving it up. In 2008, his ZANU-PF party [unleashed a wave of violent intimidation and repression](#) after Mugabe lost the first round of a presidential election to the Movement for Democratic Change's Morgan Tsvangarai, a crisis that only ended when the opposition agreed to a power-sharing scheme in which Mugabe essentially remained in charge. The upcoming election is another chance for the MDC to score an electoral victory over Mugabe -- but also a chance for ZANU-PF to violently cement its control.

The past couple months have seen another, less noted development that adds an additional layer of ambiguity to the country's future. On February 26th, a UN tribunal in Johannesburg determined that Georges Tadonki, the head of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Zimbabwe in 2008, had been wrongfully fired from the UN after he attempted to warn headquarters of an oncoming cholera epidemic, whose severity was compounded by the ongoing electoral violence. He was fired after Agostinho Zacarias, then the UN's country chief in Zimbabwe and [currently](#) the UN Development Program's Resident Coordinator in South Africa, decided that his own closeness with ZANU-PF [overrode his responsibility to the UN's missions and values](#). Yet Zacarias was actively abetted by officials in Turtle Bay, who gave into his demands, which included the marginalization and eventual firing of Tadonki, even as conditions inside Zimbabwe deteriorated. The case raises the question of just how the UN will perform in Zimbabwe if

the events of 2008 repeat themselves -- or in the event that the country finally experiences its long sought-after democratic transition.

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Tadonki brought a wrongful termination claim against the UN after the organization effectively fired him in early 2009. The UN's [bulletproof legal immunity](#) necessitates an unusual system for adjudicating such cases. Because the UN cannot be sued, tribunals convened by the UN itself deal with employment claims, pseudo-courts that don't adhere to several important aspects of accepted U.S. and European legal procedure.

So it's significant the tribunal's [104-page ruling](#) in this case is such a damning survey of misplaced priorities and institutional rot.

The UN-appointed judges found that Tadonki's firing was the result of concentric layers of favoritism and bad faith, tendencies that defined not only the country head's relationship with Mugabe's government, but Turtle Bay's apparently-backward view of the UN's entire mission in Zimbabwe. This case involves more than just a single UN bureaucrat enjoying a disturbingly close relationship with one of the most oppressive governments on earth. The UN system also actively abetted a toxic organizational status quo in Zimbabwe, even when it meant running the career of an employee who the tribunal found to be a talented humanitarian professional and a courageous whistleblower -- and even if it meant putting thousands of Zimbabweans' lives in danger.

According to the tribunal, in addition to upholding the egalitarian values of the UN Charter, Zacarias's job charged him with "speaking out about humanitarian issues and defending humanitarian principles." In these respects, he was a clear failure. He had a tight relationship with members of the ruling party. According to Robert Amsterdam, who was one of Tadonki's lawyers, Zacarias's testimony revealed that he had known various ZANU-PF leaders when what was then an anti-apartheid rebel movement was based in Mozambique. According to the decision, during his posting in Zimbabwe, Zacarias "would spend most of his social time with a Mr. Nicholas Goche, an old ZANU-PF politburo member and former head of the Central Intelligence Organization from 2000 to 2004." This closeness spurred a willful ignorance of the country's deteriorating conditions. In the run-up to

the disastrous 2008 vote, "Zacarias seemed to not take cognizance of the fact that there was likely to be widespread and unprecedented violence," despite the mobilization of pro-ZANU-PF paramilitary. Even as pro-Mugabe thugs savaged the opposition MDC and its supporters, Zacarias did his best to shield himself from the ruling party's scrutiny, even if it meant discarding commonly-held humanitarian protocol:

According to the Applicant, the United Nations could not use the term Internally Displaced People (IDPs) as is the international practice. They were called "mobile and vulnerable population" in order to "protect" RC/HC Zacarias because he had the job of dealing with the government, and the government did not want to hear certain things. It did not want to hear that there were forcibly displaced Zimbabweans and such language mentioned in a report would embarrass RC/HC Zacarias. The Applicant said that there were about two million IDPs in the region of Murabantsvina...The use of "mobile and vulnerable population" would make it easier for Mr. Zacarias.

"The bottom line," the tribunal concludes, "is that the political agenda that RC/HC Zacarias was engaged in with the Government of Zimbabwe far outweighed any humanitarian concerns that OCHA [Tadonki's office] may have had." There were tangible costs attached to Zacarias's accommodation of Mugabe's government. In the report's most scathing section, the judges explain that Zacarias's closeness to the ZANU-PF made it impossible for Tadonki to carry out his duties as the head of OCHA -- a stance which had deep consequences for Zimbabweans counting on the UN's assistance in the midst of a cholera epidemic and political emergency:

There was a humanitarian drama unfolding and people were dying. Part of the population had been abandoned and subjected to repression. The issue between [Tadonki] and the HC [Zacarias] was to what extent these humanitarian concerns should be exposed and addressed and the risk that there was of infuriating the Mugabe government. Matters started to sour when the Applicant started doing his job. RC/HC Zacarias preferred that the Applicant remain quiet. If he remained quiet, OCHA at headquarters would say he was not doing his job. Therefore while silence would bring him trouble from OCHA, noise would infuriate the RC/HC. When the Applicant started organizing a forum made up of the NGOs, the United Nations and the

donors to discuss the situation in Zimbabwe with the approval of RC/HC Zacarias and to achieve a common understanding of the humanitarian situation, the RC/HC became angry.

Tadonki didn't stay silent -- he "had the courage to inform the OCHA Headquarters in New York that Zimbabwe was on the brink of a humanitarian crisis while RC/HC Zacarias was pretending to the contrary." Zacarias had undermined Tadonki at other points during the OCHA head's brief yet eventful stint in Zimbabwe, most notably by convincing the Zimbabwean government not to approve residency accreditation for Tadonki's wife and children, who were living in South Africa during his period of employment (covered in paragraph 163 of the ruling). But Tadonki paid an additional and even deeper price for his willingness to warn Turtle Bay about Zimbabwe's humanitarian plight -- he was fired in January of 2009, after he had warned of the potential ravages of the looming cholera outbreak, which was worsened by the electoral chaos and eventually [killed over 4,000 people](#).

None of this would have been possible without the cooperation of Turtle Bay, which seemed to care more about protecting its man in Harare than it did about the UN's vital mission in a country badly in need of the organization's assistance. Tadonki was investigated by a UN bureaucrat at Zacarias's behest, even when there was no proof of professional malfeasance. One of the decision's more significant subplots was the active role that assistant UN secretary General Catherine Bragg, who is still a high-ranking official with OCHA, played in Tadonki's dismissal -- indeed, it was Bragg herself who informed Tadonki that his contract wouldn't be renewed. Amsterdam believes that the UN was intent on protecting Zacarias at all costs. "Part of the reason nobody could take on Zacarias was that his role was unassailable," explains Amsterdam. UN headquarters was convinced that in terms of their Zimbabwe operations, "Zacarias was the absolutely critical pivot, and everything could be sacrificed to him."

At one point in the report (paragraph 189), the tribunal flatly wonders why the UN even bothered having an OCHA head in Zimbabwe at all. It's a reasonable question: Tadonki's two predecessors were also fired after brief and tumultuous postings to Harare, and Amsterdam believes that the UN knowingly sent his client into an extremely hostile work environment. "That they could have put anybody into the situation after Zacarias had savaged the prior two occupants of that post was just inhumane. It was like they were

setting him up for exactly what transpired."

The UN and Zacarias's chief responsibility should have been to Zimbabwe's embattled civilian population. Instead, both failed to live up to their obligations -- even as they were conspiring against someone who had exceeded them. That campaign even seeped into the tribunal proceedings, as Zacarias and the UN made specious and unsupported claims in court that Tadonki had been accused of sexual harassment while based in Harare. It didn't work, but the UN's efforts are continuing even now: the UN has stated that it is appealing its own tribunal's decision, and according to Amsterdam, the World Body has taken the first procedural steps necessary to retry the case. At a March 6 press conference, a UN spokesperson refused to comment on the case -- except to say that "judgments of the UN Dispute Tribunal are not final until they have been confirmed by the UN Appeals Tribunal," and that "the Organization intends to file an appeal of this judgment."

At times, the UN has taken reform quite seriously. For instance, after the [Oil for Food](#) revelations in the early 2000s, then-Secretary General Kofi Annan convened a [high-level panel](#) and [summit](#) focusing on ways to improve the organization, which, among other changes, led to the dramatic step of dissolving the UN's troubled Commission on Human Rights. Yet for Amsterdam, the decision to appeal reveals just how little the UN has learned from the Tadonki affair. "If you had a normal organization, heads would roll," he says. "Structures would change. But clearly this is not a normal organization. This is an organization that's pathological in its respect for its employees."

The events in the Tadonki case mostly happened in 2008, but they are less distant than they seem -- and not just because of the UN's plans to appeal. According to Dawit Giorgis, a visiting fellow at the [Foundation for Defense of Democracies](#) who was a consultant for various UN missions in Africa throughout the 90s and 2000s, the Tadonki case is an extreme example of a more general problem. "It happens regularly in many countries where officials get too close to a government," says Giorgis, "and cross the line of working with people, officials or policies that are contrary to the larger policy of the United Nations."

Giorgis says that the UN "generally does a good job at field level." Yet the UN is a sprawling and perhaps ungovernably vast organization, consisting of scores of large, semi-autonomous offices and agencies. "It is beyond the

capacity of the headquarters to coordinate this body," says Giorgis. For reasons of bureaucratic expediency -- and perhaps necessity -- there's an organizational incentive not to micro-manage from Turtle Bay, and to resolve cases like Zacarias's apparent conflict with Tadonki as quickly and easily as possible.

That's hardly the only structural issue that might make another Tadonki-type case likely. Joshua Muravchick, a fellow at the School for Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University and [author of a book](#) on UN reform, says that the UN is largely administered by entrenched bureaucrats who benefit from the organization's current governing structure. The few countries with the influence to change that structure -- like the U.S. - - would rather dedicate their energies to peace and security issues, like the Iranian nuclear program, or the Syria conflict. "Our people at the UN see this endemic corruption around them, but it's very understandable that they don't have an interest in raising Hell about it," says Muravchick. "On the contrary, they prefer, for good reasons, to want to make people happy so that we can spend our capital on big issues that really matter to us... it's very rarely in anyone's interest at the UN to blow the whistle on anyone else within the UN system."

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In a plausible worst-case scenario, this coming year will bear a similarity to the crisis of 2008. With elections planned for an as-yet unannounced date later in the year, the country could be heading towards another inflection point, or even another explosion -- situations in which international organizations would take on heavy humanitarian and moral responsibilities. "The UN was being asked, and will be asked in the future, to play a key role in the transition in Zimbabwe, and they have been completely contaminated by their behavior," says Todd Moss, a senior fellow at the [Center for Global Development](#), and an official in the State Department's African Affairs office during the 2008 election crisis. "It comes down to trust. Who is the UN supposed to be working for? The signals were pretty clear that parts of the UN office in Harare were working very closely with ZANU-PF."

The next election will give the UN the opportunity to demonstrate just how much its approach to Zimbabwe has changed. At the moment, the successful constitutional referendum raises the possibility of an election that is at least

procedurally sound. But ZANU-PF had the opportunity to yield power when it was defeated in the 2008 vote. Instead, it chose to intimidate its opponents into submission. Zimbabwe and Zambia are [co-hosting](#) the UN World Tourism Organization's general assembly in August of this year, raising hopes that an influential faction within ZANU-PF genuinely wants to reintegrate their country with the rest of the region and the international community more generally. A clean vote would be an ideal place to start. But Moss sees little reason to believe that the party's brutal electoral calculus has changed. "There's no prospect of an opposition victory as long as Mugabe is alive," says Moss.

There's evidence that ZANU-PF is already going after opposition and civil society organizations in the run-up to an election that hasn't even been scheduled yet. In January, agents [broke into the offices](#) of the Zimbabwe Peace Project, which keeps a database of police malpractice, and arrested its director; in December, police arrested members of the independent Zimbabwean Electoral Support Network for holding "an unsanctioned public meeting." Police [raided the studios of Radio Dialogue](#), an influential community broadcasting project, on March 1; in some rural communities, security forces have gone door-to-door confiscating short-wave radios. Most notably, human rights lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa and four Tsvangarai aides were [arrested](#) in late March.

"There's an impressive level of political direction and assertiveness by ordinary citizens, human rights defenders, and civil society," says Jeff Smith, an advocacy officer for the [Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights](#). "What's worrying is that the ZANU-PF regime has really been able to keep these social forces in check." Widespread fear and resentment of ZANU-PF might convince the MDC that they can win when elections are held. But the question is still whether Mugabe will allow the opposition to win - and whether it's possible to have any kind of democratic process in a country where the government is so determined to hold onto power.

This year's vote could be no more legitimate than 2008's. Five years later, UN still boasts the largest and most capable humanitarian operation on earth. If the election starts to resemble the 2008 crisis, lives will depend on the UN doing a better job of upholding its values and responsibilities than it did the last time around.