

# Comrade Ivor charms the Africans

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Special report from Geneva by Nicholas Carroll, James Fox and Judith Acton

TWENTY-FOUR hours before the formal opening of the Geneva conference on Rhodesia, a small team of British officials led by the conference chairman, Ivor Richard, sat on one side of a long table at the UN's Palais des Nations. Lined up opposite them were leading members of the two delegations of the Patriotic Front of Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo, respectively leaders of Zanu and Zapu.

The atmosphere was tense. On the African side there was much bitterness, especially in the hearts of Jason Moyo, of Nkomo's delegation, and of Mukudzei Mudzi, of Mugabe's delegation, the latter freed only last week from prison in Zambia. Both spoke angrily of Britain's colonialist record and of the uncaring attitude of Britain. Mudzi said: "You just think we are a lot of damned niggers."

This was too much for Richard: "You ought to know that word is not in my vocabulary, and you should not seek to put it there. Before we go any further with this meeting I want you to withdraw that remark," he said. Grudgingly, Mudzi complied. Richard went on to defend Britain's record of decolonisation, but he spoke without heat, knowing well enough the miseries experienced by many of the men opposite him.

Soon afterwards one of the African officials passed a piece of paper across the table to his British opposite number, requesting the names of the British people present. The Briton retorted by passing across another piece of paper requesting the names of the Africans present. The African official responded first. He passed over a list which began, "Comrade Mugabe, Comrade Nkomo, Comrade General Tongogara," and soon. The British official read this, then passed over his list. It read: "Comrade Richard, Comrade Sir Anthony Duff, Comrade..."

The African looked at the British list, and his stern expression dissolved into a broad grin. These two incidents may have helped to achieve the psychological breakthrough Richard has gained with the Africans, who were initially deeply hostile, not so much to him as to his lowly rank of ambassador.

In fact, the Africans show signs of forming a warm attachment for Richard. They like his forthright manner and they have realised that he has sympathy for their difficulties. Bishop Abel Muzorewa, leader of the African National Council of Zimbabwe, said after his first meeting with Richard: "I think he could become a tremendous chairman"—and he was not referring to Richard's ample bulk.

When one considers the fulminations of the four African leaders on their arrival here a week ago, it was a small miracle that the opening session took place at all.

Yet another little miracle, in the British view, followed next day when the remainder of the opening formal session took place, and each leader made a statement. If the ritual references to genocide and terrorism were ignored, the moderation of the speeches was astounding, with everyone pledging himself to work for a settlement (though still on seemingly irreconcilable terms).

For the next few days Richard is resuming his private talks with individual leaders, to try to identify how much agreement there is on the concept of a



Nkomo and Smith: African leaders sit across the conference hall in Geneva facing the man who put them in the jails and camps

council of state and a council of ministers; how soon independence should come (Smith says after two years, Mugabe says one year); and what constitutes "majority rule." By Wednesday he hopes to be ready to call another formal session.

Richard appears to be convinced that Smith will in the end settle for something less than the Kissinger proposals on which he is still standing firm. Richard believes, however, that even if things go reasonably well, it will be near Christmas week before agreement is reached on an interim government.

For his part, Smith says: "If any African wants to talk to me, here I am. Let him come. I shall stay here as long as there is any reasonable chance of making progress. But my time is limited. We have got important tasks back home, not like these Africans who have nothing better to do than sit around here talking indefinitely."

At least, for the time being, most of the Africans are determined to stay in Geneva talking indefinitely, if only to deprive Smith of the psychological advantage of being able to blame them for breaking off the talks.

IT HAS been an intensely emotional week for the men and women of the four African delegations. The background to the conference is composed of human suffering.

That came across poignantly on Thursday when Bishop Muzorewa took his place at the conference table, leaving an empty seat on each side of him. An aide placed a card on each place with the names Comrade Enos Nkala and Dr Edson Sithole.

Sithole, who was one of Muzorewa's closest advisers during the formation of the African National Council early in 1972, and one of Rhodesia's first qualified barristers, was abducted last October by three white men and, until this week, nothing

was heard of him. The Rhodesian government has consistently refused to admit knowledge of his whereabouts.

Muzorewa revealed in his speech that Sithole had been recently seen alive. Last week The Sunday Times received further evidence: Sithole was seen in the hands of the Smith regime at the Nkomo army barracks, some 20 miles from Salisbury. The information comes from Sithole's fiancée, Evelyn Kwanza, who is in Geneva with Muzorewa's delegation.

Many of the nationalist leaders in Geneva have spent a decade or more in detention. In many cases, it has broken their health and often their family lives. Now, they sit across the conference hall facing the expressionless man who put them in the jails and the camps.

The unity that can be forged out of this adversity could be clearly seen in the smooth workings of the Patriotic Front—on paper an uneasy alliance between Mugabe's Zanu, and Nkomo's Zapu. Correspondents who saw

the first accidental meeting of large segments of the Nkomo and Mugabe teams in the foyer of the Intercontinental Hotel were visibly moved by the sight of men, portrayed for years as enemies, falling into each others arms, breaking up in laughter and tears.

There are, however, basic ideological and personal differences between the Mugabe and Nkomo factions and between their Patriotic Front and Muzorewa's ANC. If the talks fail and the war intensifies it will be

the hard men who will make the political running—especially Mugabe, and the Zipa commander, Josiah Tongogara. It is they who plan to take the prize of political power from the battlefield.

It was on these two men that much of the glamour was inevitably focused. Mugabe was perhaps the most impressive figure in the black Rhodesian camp, moving swiftly, like a boxer, through the lobbies and conference halls, rapid and intense, a man with a powerful presence and a golden touch with rhetoric.

Mugabe has based his political support on the guerrilla army, Zipa (the combined forces of Zanu and Zapu), of which he is the accepted spokesman. It works in practice, although no Zipa cadre will admit to Mugabe's leadership. His power base is not a certainty and last week he was described as "riding a tiger."

Threatening to eclipse Mugabe's glitter and even possibly his career was Tongogara, 36 years old, tall and, from a distance, fierce-looking architect of Zanu's army. Tongogara was a mythical figure in the West when he turned up in Geneva, dressed in a jeans suit, three days after his release from detention in Zambia.

He had been jailed with 56 other Zanu members for his alleged part in the murder last year of Herbert Chitepo, chairman of Zanu. Trained in China in the 1960s after only two years' secondary education, Tongogara fought alongside Frelimo in Tete province in Mozambique. He was the first guerrilla to achieve high political office in Zanu, three years ago.

Nkomo, the other half of the Patriotic Front, always considered the genial moderate, has also hardened his line—especially since the breakdown of the Victoria Falls talks last year—and now speaks of "hard-ware politics" as "the only politics of Zimbabwe."

At one press conference he created some surprise by announcing: "I am the head of Zipa." But when pressed on the political system he wanted for Zimbabwe—military or civilian—he showed his true differences with the hard-men. "We are political parties in Zimbabwe," he said, "and the armies are the instruments of the parties,

so there is no military government."

But a Zanu official ridiculed this position. "We didn't take up arms just to put politicians in power," he said. "The military struggle is intended to achieve political objectives. After that it would not make sense for guerrilla fighters, who are also politicians, simply to hand over to a civilian leadership."

The Zanu strategy is perhaps the least ambiguous. They see a transparent Smith strategy—to get the blacks to walk out of the conference, to return to Rhodesia and to implement the Kissinger plan with token black politicians in the interim government. It is this they see as the basis for British fear of involvement, and why they are pressing so hard for Britain to grant independence.

Their programme for the conference seems to be: First, to have the question of independence clearly accepted by the British; secondly, a firm date set for independence. Only after that will they discuss the composition of the interim government.

"If we want to talk to Smith," said one Zanu official last week, "we pull the trigger. The only language he speaks is a violent language and he only understands the bullet. That is why we want to talk to the British."

Muzorewa, however, is watched with a certain wariness. This man who emanates an almost palpable Christian goodness has transformed himself into an ambitious politician, much to the irritation of Nkomo, who put him on the map, and to the occasional embarrassment of members of his own delegation, like the diminutive Rev. Canaan Banana, who is aware that the ANC he helped create with Muzorewa was meant to serve as a unifying front and not as a third political party.

Finally, there was embarrassed tension when the veteran leader, Ndbanangiri Sithole, arrived at the Palais des Nations, still claiming to lead Zanu. Bravely maintaining his considerable dignity, Sithole found himself rounding up non-entities at short notice to fill his delegation. Only Sithole's warmth and intensity remain. His power is gone.