



SEKAI HOLLAND is the Zimbabwean Co-Minister of State for National Healing and Reconciliation and Integration in the Cabinet of President Mugabe and Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai. Sekai, who received the Sydney Peace Prize last year, has been involved in a number of human rights issues from those of the Australian Aborigines, ending the apartheid system in South Africa and the rights of women and democracy in Zimbabwe. She spoke to JANSET BERZEG and MARIANO COELLO.

The Quest for Peace

Can you tell us a bit about the Zimbabwe you grew up in, what and where were the experiences that made you the human rights activist you are today? Who influenced you most?

My mum and dad have influenced me a lot because they had very strong views about the world, on education, honesty, fairness and equality. They thought that we had to get a formal education; no matter how bad it was, because a formal education disciplines and teaches how to read the world. My parents never distinguished between boys and girls when it came to education. We were all educated. They also taught us to be as good as the next person, and the notion of equality for all people. So they taught us to respect everyone, to share. Both my parents were teachers, and then they got into media.

The human-rights activist in me started in my family home. Our house was always like a hostel. People would just come and stay. They sought refuge from several problems or just advice from relatives. Everyone was assisted. In Africa if somebody comes to your house it is because they trust you. So do feed them, give them a place to sleep. So every corner of our house was always full of guests. Although we were all brought up the same way, these values are now best carried on by us girls, I think the boys weren't listening, because none of them really followed in those footsteps.

You were also part of the protest movement in Australia in the late 1960s. What did you learn from Indigenous Australians?

The year I came to Australia was 1964. That was a year of complete transformation for Australia, Zimbabwe and the world. Everywhere in Africa they wanted independence. Ghana became independent around that time. The British PM was talking about "winds of change sweeping through Africa".

In Zimbabwe from 1957 the nationalists were setting up their structures. They had a big fight with my father because they wanted him to lead but my father laughed and said "how do I lead people if we cannot respect one another?". He thought that education was the key.

When I came to Australia I asked to stay with missionaries. I was hosted by an Anglican sister who was very pleased to welcome a good Christian from Africa.

I happened to appear on ABC radio and someone gave me the contact of Jim Webb and a small intellectual group in Melbourne. When I met him the first time, he had just come back from the US where he had met President Kennedy, who was influenced by Jim's idea of sending Australian volunteers abroad to assist, and implemented it in the US.

Jim saw Australia as being part of Asia and favoured the idea of young Australians getting to learn about their region better and getting educated through volunteer work. Jim and his team were far ahead of the society of those days. They insisted that young African students needed to understand that Australians had abused their own Indigenous peoples and they were not recognised in Asia. So I realised that what we were

learning in class was not real. I was looking for Aborigines and there were none.

Eventually I moved to Sydney and starting making contacts. I met Faith Bangla and teamed up with a brilliant group of people in Redfern. In the meantime at Sydney University people like Meredith Burgmann and Denise Freney were advocating for change. People who had very good ideas were in Sydney in 1969.

At the same time my husband's godfather was the Secretary of the Liberal party. So immediately we were linked into the political structures of the right. It was a very volatile time for everybody though. I was extremely naïve actually. But we really couldn't do anything wrong. So that's how my husband and I got involved, in fact we ended up being the leaders with people who wanted to follow.

A lot of exciting changes have been made since, and of course the fire I think started at the 1967 Referendum that allowed Aboriginal people to be counted as citizens.

"The only way to do things is through peaceful means. You can be loud, get angry, upset, shout etc. But non-violence is the only way."

You helped found the Movement for Democratic Change in 1998, the only substantive challenge to President Mugabe, and as a result you had to endure torture, harassment and death threats. Yet, you have been working closely with Mugabe as a Minister for Reconciliation, how is it working for you?

Politicians aren't worried about bruises or threats. What we want is an environment where we can put things on the table to find a common ground, so that the nation is able to move on. So with Mugabe when we meet him, to us he is an enabler because it is his people that are the perpetrators. In the end, this must change. If we distance ourselves from Mugabe, these people are going to be a big problem. But in the last four years he really has been getting better in articulating the National Healing Organ's message of peace.

At the end what we want from him is his signature; his signature condemning violence, his signature to build an infrastructure for peace. He has been part of the problem and part of the solution agreeing on very basic things like no violence. Mugabe now articulates the message of non-violence and as far as we are concerned he has done his job. That's an important step.



Packed to the rafters ... the house of Sekai Holland and husband Jim is home to about 30 children. PHOTO: Frederic Courbet

Tell us about the Transitional Government set up in February 2009. What has it achieved so far?

Everything, we have got the infrastructure for peace completed. It is a tool recommended by the Organ that encourages survivors of political violence, victims and perpetrators to acknowledge the history and culture of violence and to address the damage caused by violence. It includes mechanisms to prevent future violence. It is now a part of the constitution.

We've had our input for the Constitutional Parliamentary Committee (COPAC); the constitutional reform process. We did what we could.

You are in the process of negotiating for the Zim STARTTS project; a service for the treatment and rehabilitation of Zimbabwean torture survivors, to partner with the IRCT member CSU (Counselling Services Unit), Midlands State University, as well as STARTTS, to establish a similar mental health service in Zimbabwe to provide rehabilitation programs for refugees and internally-displaced persons. How is the project progressing?

I am very sorry to say that CSU was attacked last night and five CSU staff are in jail. Some of them were going to come here today. They were attacked and the police officers confiscated computers and documents from the CSU office.

On the other hand, there is a need to secure funds and we are hoping the European Union will support the project at some stage. So, this project has been a long-time dream and need of our society. Hopefully it will kick start when we secure the funds because the technical assistance is already there, thanks to STARTTS.

You have always advocated for political transformation through non-violent activism. What has time taught you?

The only way to do things is through peaceful means. You can be loud, get angry, upset, shout etc. But non-violence is the only way. The passing of time and my experience is not going to change my opinion on that. I have only learnt to model change through non-violence. R