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 MARLANO 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 an intellectual group in Melbourne. When I met him the first time, he gave me the contact of Jim Webb and a small intelligence. I was hosted by an Anglican sister who was 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.”

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 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 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.