

**Testimony by United States Agency for International Development
Assistant Administrator for Africa Earl Gast
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Subcommittee on Africa
June 18, 2013
“USAID Assistance to Zimbabwe during the Electoral Period”**

Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Flake, and Members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I appreciate your continued interest in how U.S. policies and assistance programs can help Zimbabweans build a peaceful and stable democracy in which prosperity is available to all. I would also like to thank the Acting Assistant Secretary for Africa at the Department of State for his leadership on this issue.

The negotiated resolution to Zimbabwe’s violent electoral dispute in 2008 brought with it an opportunity for the consolidation of democratic institutions and improved systems of governance in Zimbabwe. A Government of National Unity (GNU) was formed, composed of Zimbabwe’s then-ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), and the two factions of the former opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)—MDC-T (Tsvangirai) and MDC-N (Ncube). Together, the parties of the unity government agreed on a roadmap to achieve sustained political stability through stronger democratic processes. Broadly, the General Political Agreement (GPA) required that the GNU would draft a new constitution, enhance basic freedoms (including media), and reform Zimbabwe’s security sector before the next elections were held.

USAID has strongly supported the unity government’s efforts to implement the GPA, including the development of a new constitution, which was adopted in May 2013. The U.S. Government worked with the Zimbabwean Parliament and civil society to ensure that the new constitution would expand protections under the bill of rights and enhance gender equity provisions. USAID support for civil society activities culminated in an awareness-raising program highlighting the need for youth to peacefully participate in the March 16 referendum through which a record voter turnout overwhelmingly endorsed the new constitution.

Yet challenges remain. On May 31, the Constitutional Court ruled that elections must be held by the end of July, and on June 13 President Mugabe issued a presidential decree declaring July 31 the date of elections. However, little progress has been made on the other key reforms identified in the GPA—most notably, media and security sector reforms—and it is unlikely that full implementation of the agreement could occur by July 31. The constitution includes strict requirements that must be fulfilled during the pre-election period, including voter registration and inspection of the voter role, and candidate primaries. It also requires that the Electoral Law

be updated by the Parliament to reflect changes in the constitution before an election date can be set-- procedures that were not respected in President Mugabe's decree. The absence of clear, governing law may give rise to challenges in the post-election period and underscores the need to follow an agreed upon, detailed election roadmap.

The requirements included in the GPA are important because progress made in reforming these sectors is necessary for a credible election. The absence of transparent and accountable pre-electoral processes will cast doubt regarding the legitimacy of the election results. Civil society leaders are facing increasing incidences of intimidation and harassment. Restrictions on media freedoms and public meetings—particularly in rural areas—are common. Furthermore, whether as a result of insufficient resources or political will, government attempts to provide basic information on the voter registration process have been inadequate. The steps taken before and after election day are just as, if not more, important than the election day itself.

The new chair of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) has demonstrated commitment to addressing many of these shortcomings and is reaching out to key stakeholders, including political party leaders and civil society, to improve the process. Previously, it cost \$30,000 to obtain a comprehensive copy of the country's voter rolls—a sum out of reach of political parties and civil society. As a result of her direct efforts, the cost has dropped to \$5,000. These efforts could produce legitimate reforms to begin to address the question of the Zimbabwean Government's ability and will to conduct free and fair registration and electoral processes.

As preparations progress, USAID continues to provide support where possible in an effort to address these challenges. This support has three core pillars: empowering citizen participation in the elections, observing the election process, and supporting credible election administration.

The first pillar emphasizes access to information as key to catalyzing the participation of citizens—particularly women and youth. At USAID-supported youth clubs, young men and women have consistently expressed concern about the unmet need for basic information, particularly outside of urban areas. In response, a dynamic group of young partners designed a groundbreaking voter mobilization campaign that is broadcast on weekly radio programs and through social media outlets. For the first time, Zimbabwean youth are discussing and debating issues related to their participation in elections. The campaign's popularity continues to expand, and the ZEC has been critical to its success. ZEC staff members regularly participate in the radio program and field live questions from listeners on the challenges they face in attempting to register. Similar programs use engaging events such as theater and music concerts as an opportunity to have well-known Zimbabweans disseminate information on elections and the importance of voting. Other voter outreach activities have been conducted through town hall style meetings, community dialogue, and community newsletters.

Given the history of violence associated with Zimbabwean elections, peace-building and reconciliation are critical, and faith-based organizations play a central role. As a complement to voter mobilization activities, the United States supports faith-based organizations' efforts to conduct large-scale peace rallies that feature gospel music and other performances. Messages calling for peaceful elections are delivered by representatives from across the political spectrum as well as religious leaders, and thousands of Zimbabweans turn out for each event.

The second pillar of USAID support focuses on observation of the election process in accordance with the principles of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)—the regional organization that has been monitoring implementation of the GPA. USAID and other donors are supporting domestic observation efforts. However, avenues to support international observation are more limited. Despite calls from the international community and Zimbabwean civil society for long-term international or regional observers to document the pre-election environment, the current Electoral Law does not provide a mechanism for accrediting long-term observers—a critical gap. At this point in time, the USG is not funding regional or international observation delegations and it remains unclear whether the Government of Zimbabwe will accredit such observers in a timeframe allowing them to make an informed assessment of the overall electoral process. It is important to note even before elections take place that trust in the credibility of the election is not possible if long-term observers are not allowed.

The third pillar of our support is in the critical area of election administration. Efforts are underway to secure approval of a memorandum of understanding between the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the Government of Zimbabwe, which would enable USAID to provide support for the ZEC's priority actions. In the interim, USAID supports election administration strengthening and civil society efforts to provide evidence-based research and information on election-related best practices in the region. The goal is to provide this information to key stakeholders, including Parliamentarians and members of the ZEC, to ensure that Zimbabwe's legal and regulatory frameworks provide a foundation for transparent and credible electoral processes consistent with international norms and guidelines.

Supporting each of these three pillars is USAID's overarching assistance to Zimbabwe. By providing basic services for Zimbabwe's citizens, we not only meet immediate needs of citizens but also demonstrate that better governance can lead to better lives. The United States provides substantial support to combat the spread of HIV through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Other efforts are increasing food security—now a critical issue for Zimbabwe—and working to improve Zimbabwe's business enabling environment to attract private sector investment, particularly in the once-thriving agricultural sector. USAID is also working with the Ministries of Finance and Economic Planning to strengthen human and institutional capacity for economic policy analysis, and to rebuild Zimbabwe's statistical foundations for economic analysis. These activities encourage the use of evidence-based

economic policy research as a counterpoint to politically driven debate around economic policies. They also seek to broadly disseminate policy research and analysis to encourage public-private dialogue to improve Zimbabwe's economic policies and strengthen the policymaking process. In the short term, given the targeted harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and democracy advocates in the lead up to the elections, the United States will continue to prioritize human rights and conflict mitigation and management activities.

We continue to believe that the Government of Zimbabwe can promote conditions for a credible electoral process in the pre-election period, on election day, and in the tabulation of results, and USAID will continue to support its efforts. At the same time, we need to maintain our vigilance to ensure that barriers to participation—whether it is through intimidation, media restrictions, or denial of public assembly in the period running up to the election—do not undermine the credibility of those results.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Flake, and members of the Subcommittee for the continued commitment you have shown to the Zimbabwean people and your support for real reform within the government. I welcome any questions you might have.