

Mugabe Finds a Home in Asia

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A detested African satrap and his family take refuge in the east

Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong are becoming homes from home for Robert Mugabe and his family. In Hong Kong the government is ignoring its own laws to accommodate the despised African dictator.

While Zimbabweans, once citizens of one of Africa's most prosperous, food exporting countries, suffer food shortages, cholera epidemics and the world's highest inflation (approx 5,000 percent) the country's first family has been splashing out on shopping and banking trips to Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Attention to their travels was occasioned by an assault on a Hong Kong resident press photographer working for the London Sunday Times by Grace Mugabe and a bodyguard in Hong Kong. The photographer was taking pictures of her shopping near the Shangri-la (Kowloon) hotel where she was staying. This led to the news that the Mugabes' daughter Bona, 20, had been studying at HK University since last September under an assumed name.

Asia Sentinel has now learned that this was a modest visit compared with one last year by Mr and Mrs Mugabe and a huge retinue which occupied two floors of the same Shangri-la Hotel. The hotel bill, running to tens of thousands of US dollars, was paid in cash by a flunky. Under Hong Kong law, such large cash transactions are supposed to be reported to the police and investigated under anti-money-laundering money rules.

But either the hotel, controlled by the Kuok Group, failed to notify the authorities, or the government decided to ignore the question of why Mugabe and his family and retinue of bodyguards paid cash. (The reason may well be that no international bank would accept the credit cards of persons banned from entering the US and other major jurisdictions).

According to reports on Zimbabwe news sites, on this latest occasion US\$92,000 in cash was drawn from the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, the broken country's central bank, prior to this trip, for spending on hotels and Grace's favorite activity - shopping. Grace, who is 40 years younger than her 84-year old husband, has on previous occasions attracted attention for her extravagant spending in luxury shops.

Prior to Hong Kong, she had been in Malaysia and Singapore with her husband. They are very welcome in Malaysia where her husband was lionized by former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. However, to protect Malaysia's own reputation and avoid local controversy, the visit was kept low key. As for Singapore, according to Zimbabwean media reports, this is the favored location for Zimbabwean ministers and military chiefs to park their ill-gotten wealth.

In Hong Kong the government and the University of Hong Kong say there is no reason why Bona should not study there. Many sympathize. The sins of the parents should not be visited on their children. However, Australia last year expelled the student offspring of some of Mugabe's ministers

and Britain has been contemplating the same – which is probably why Bona left her studies in the UK to come to Hong Kong and the protection of China, a good friend of Mugabe's. The fact that she was allowed to enroll under an assumed name in itself is quite extraordinary and suggests some high level, un-transparent dealings.

However deserving Bona may be of an education, the fact is that her father's policies have ruined Zimbabwe's educational system and forced the few students who can afford it to go abroad. In Bona's case the cost to the nation is not just her board and tuition, plus any gifts that might have been made to help her anonymous entry, but the cost of providing for her mother's demands while Bona is in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is still investigating the assault on the photographer but charges seem unlikely now that the culprits are out of town and Mrs Mugabe anyway would claim diplomatic immunity. Mugabe's political thuggery in Zimbabwe is well enough known. His own reputation in that respect was confirmed by footage of assault by a bodyguard on a journalist who was trying to interview him in Cairo last year.

But thugs and corrupt politicians remain welcome in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore so long as they bring enough money to be spent or laundered.

P.S.

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