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NZ stand on Mugabe earns praise

A leading member of Zimbabwe's democracy movement has praised New Zealand's strong stand against President Robert Mugabe, but says more can be done.

Sekai Holland, a leader of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) who was beaten by security forces in March, urged New Zealand to train Zimbabwean refugees to help reconstruct the country once Mugabe goes.

Holland, who is married to an Australian, said New Zealand's democracy served as an inspiration to those struggling in her country to end Mugabe's rule.

She also praised Prime Minister Helen Clark for her efforts to unite the Commonwealth in action against the regime. Mugabe severed ties with the body at the end of 2003.

"In Zimbabwe, when someone has done you a good turn, you say thank you very much, please don't get tired," said Holland, who was brought to New Zealand by the Green Party and the Zimbabwean community.

She said New Zealand had "the best" immigration policy when it came to Zimbabweans, but said officials could do more to assist those who arrived without proper papers.

The Government should consider providing them with scholarships to study.

"We want people to get training to go home. Nobody who is Zimbabwean intends to stay where they are. We come from the centre of Africa, which is the best place in the world. We are going home," Holland said.

In April 2002, New Zealand put in place targeted sanctions against the Mugabe Government. The principal measure was a ban on travel to New Zealand by 20 key members of the regime. The Government has also suspended its scholarships programme.

In July 2005, a ban was placed on sporting teams representing Zimbabwe coming to New Zealand.

The ban list was expanded in February 2006 to cover 249 people, including spouses of senior members of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front and top

Zimbabwe Electoral Commission officers and business people profiting from the situation in that country.

On March 11, Holland, who is 64 and a grandmother, made international headlines when she and other opposition leaders, including MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai, were beaten while in police custody.

Holland was lashed more than 80 times by 15 police officers using rhinoceros-hide whips. They broke her leg, hand and three ribs with a crowbar.

She was eventually flown out of the country for medical treatment, which is ongoing.

Holland said she planned to return as soon as she had fully recovered.

She said Zimbabweans were still being beaten and killed by Mugabe's militia, despite negotiations under way between his Government and opposition parties.

The talks between the Government and opposition, brokered by South Africa's President, Thabo Mbeki, would collapse if the violence was not stopped.

Green MP Keith Locke yesterday called on Clark to press Commonwealth leaders, when they meet in Uganda in November, to come up with fresh ways to pressure Mugabe.

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