

[CLICK HERE TO PRINT](#)[CLOSE WINDOW](#)

November 29, 2002

London outpost spreading the word back to Harare

BY OWEN SLOT

THE ICC delegation sent to Harare is today completing its inspection tour from which it will decide whether it is safe to stage part of next year's World Cup in Zimbabwe. It is to be hoped that the delegates are not being given too one-sided a glimpse of reality, but if they are struggling to get the picture beyond the red carpet that their hosts have rolled out for them, they should tune in to Short Wave Radio Africa. This is an independent station with uncensored views. It started life in Harare and was closed down by soldiers after six days on air. So now it broadcasts from North London.

Georgina Godwin, like Tony Blair, Jack Straw and company, is now banned from the country, but she broadcasts to her nation for an hour a day, and one of her specialities is cricket. It is Godwin who informed Zimbabweans that the British media were banned from reporting on the ICC trip. It is she who tells them of the plan for cricket fans to rebel passively by boycotting the present one-day series against Pakistan.

And it was in a telephone interview with Godwin that Heath Streak, the Zimbabwe captain, first made his startling observation that "there are no problems in Zimbabwe; security is fine". Given that, four days earlier, Streak's father had been imprisoned for disobeying instructions to vacate his farm, this is a comment that few have forgotten.

"He is a hero," Godwin said, "and he's divided people enormously." Some still deify him, others believe he has sold out by pandering to the government line. Godwin shows me a graphic, heavily circulated on e-mail, which quotes Streak's famous words and underneath "what a load of" and underneath that two cricket balls. "This is the joke that's been going round Zimbabwe, Heath and his balls and the fact that he doesn't have any," Godwin said.

Yesterday Godwin was trying to organise an interview with a Zimbabwean human rights group based in London and she thrust down the phone to them in disappointment when informed that they were not prepared to go on record. And yet this is the problem with a news medium that does not show President Mugabe in a particularly good light: even in London, people are scared to talk. SW Radio Africa keeps its address secret, its name does not appear on the wall of its building along with the other businesses based there and it does not want to be found.

Which brings us back to Streak, the culture of fear in Zimbabwe and the invidious position in which the cricketers find themselves. While many opposed to Mugabe are desperate for the World Cup to be taken away from Zimbabwe, the cricketers want to keep it. Robert Mugabe is patron of the Zimbabwe Cricket Union, so by playing for

his team, the cricketers are further endorsing his regime. If they were to say anything critical, they would be out of the team.

Far worse is Henry Olonga, who is hip, black and another icon in the team, who has brought out a song called *Our Zimbabwe*, the lyrics of which talk of "a land of peace", "harmony" and "pride in our hearts". "The night has gone," he sings, "and with the morning come rays of hope".

But the Zimbabwe cricketers are not completely in Mugabe's pocket. There is a biography of one of the team that contains revealing opinions and revelations and which has been sitting in cold storage until more sane times prevail. If it came out now, the player's future would be jeopardised.

So Godwin can understand Streak's stance. "I think Heath had no option but to say what he said," she said. "I don't think he meant it. It's very hard to tell the story of Zimbabwe because people are frightened. They generally don't want to go on record because they're afraid they may jeopardise their own future.

"In a way it's very unfair to ask the cricketers to comment. It's their job and you're asking them to commit professional suicide. Some of them do talk off the record but publicly it's very hard for them. The bottom line is that Mugabe is patron of the cricket union and if boycotting the cricket highlights the problem, then it must be done."

The first day of the Harare boycott was Wednesday's match. E-mails went out, SW Radio Africa spread the word, but the result was hardly revolutionary. The ground was one-third full, but apparently that is all they would expect on a Wednesday.

Maybe this reflects fear, maybe it reflects political apathy in the capital. It may even be that the outcome will be different in the two weekend games. But as Godwin said: "Self-preservation, ultimately, is what it's all about. It's easy for us to sit here in London telling people to stand up for their rights."