

Britain 'ignored' Mugabe links to massacre

Official cable suggests murder of 12 missionaries was carried out by troops loyal to Zimbabwe leader

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- By Peta Thornycroft in Johannesburg, and James Rothwell



Robert Mugabe inspects an honour guard in Harare last year.

Inset below, how The Sunday Telegraph reported the atrocity in June 1978

Top right, Peter and Brenda Griffiths on their wedding day, and their children, including Stephen

THE Callaghan government turned a blind eye to compelling evidence that Robert Mugabe may have been responsible for the slaughter of British missionaries in Rhodesia because it was reluctant to disrupt peace talks, a new book has claimed.

The massacre, which unfolded on June 23 1978 in the picturesque Vumba mountains at the height of the Rhodesian conflict, shocked the world with its sheer brutality.

Nine British missionaries and their four children were hacked to death by guerrilla fighters and then dumped on a cricket pitch outside their secondary school for black children. Several of the women were raped, while others were found with axes buried in their skulls. All had been battered or stabbed repeatedly in the face. Among the dead was a three-week-old baby and three other children.

Mr Mugabe has always denied his ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) unit was responsible. He blamed the Selous Scouts, a special forces unit in the Rhodesian Army.

Stephen Griffiths, son of former Elim mission leader Peter Griffiths, unearthed a secret diplomatic cable which suggests troops under Mr Mugabe's command carried out the atrocity.

In his book *The Axe and the Tree*, Mr Griffiths said the cable backed up his father's account of a conversation with Patrick Laver, a British Foreign Office official who claimed Mr Mugabe "unofficially" apologised for the killings, and a local inquest conducted at the time.

Mr Griffiths also made contact with a ZANLA guerilla with the nom de guerre Garikai who confessed to the atrocity and said he met many times with Peter Griffiths and begged for his forgiveness. There is no suggestion that Mr Mugabe, who did not respond to *The Sunday Telegraph's* request for comment, personally ordered the attack.

The book criticises Prime Minister James Callaghan, former foreign secretary Lord Owen and Mr Laver, who died in 2006, for not backing calls for a UN-led inquiry despite material pointing to Mr Mugabe's involvement. That included physical evidence, eyewitness accounts, and an inquest ruling.

"Seeking the truth through an inquiry following the massacre was never seriously pursued by the British authorities," said Mr Griffiths, a 52-year-old father of two and medical doctor.

Lord Owen has defended his actions to *The Telegraph*, saying that at the time he was engaged in top secret talks to prevent Mr Mugabe from taking power which he could not discuss with the victims of the Elim massacre or the British Cabinet. He added that he stood firmly by his actions, which he said aimed to prevent further bloodshed in the war-torn country.

Mr Griffiths obtained the cable, sent from Cyrus Vance, US secretary of state, to United Nations ambassador Andrew Young, under the US Freedom of Information Act. It includes a report by the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, a unit in the US state department, which says a source close to Mr Mugabe had said "a ZANLA field commander had carried out the massacre on his own initiative and ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) was considering how best to take disciplinary action".

Mr Griffiths claims the cable supports suspicions his father harboured about US and British officials knowing more about Mr Mugabe's guerilla units than they let on. Mr Griffiths said his father, who survived the massacre as he was on leave in the UK at the time, had a meeting with Patrick Laver, the Foreign Office's Rhodesia desk head, in 1979.

"At this second meeting, Laver told my father that Robert Mugabe had 'unofficially' apologised for the Elim massacre, acknowledging that it was men owing him allegiance who had carried it out, and that the platoon commander responsible had refused to return for discipline," he wrote.

The book claims Mr Callaghan's Labour government chose not to investigate further as it feared disrupting the Anglo-American peace plan which was at a delicate stage. The Labour

government believed if Mr Mugabe was excluded from the talks because of the behaviour of his guerillas, peace talks sponsored by Lord Owen would fail, according to Mr Griffiths.

However, Lord Owen told The Telegraph he considered Mr Mugabe a “dangerous zealot” and had been engaged in secret diplomatic talks aimed at sidelining the Patriotic Front leader.

Labour lost the 1979 election and Margaret Thatcher won, replacing Lord Owen with Lord Carrington. After a meeting of Commonwealth leaders in Lusaka in August 1979, Britain invited the Rhodesian government and the leaders of the Patriotic Front to peace talks at Lancaster House.

Mr Griffiths inspected records of the inquest which ruled they were killed by “members of a terrorist gang belonging to ZNLA forces [sic].” Witnesses told the inquest the killers identified themselves as Mr Mugabe’s troops, while a diary of a dead Patriotic Front guerrilla which described the killings was presented as evidence.

The cables which revealed Lord Owen’s decision not to pursue a UN-led inquiry – despite his concerns of Mr Mugabe’s possible involvement – were unearthed by Mr Griffiths in the UK Public Records Office.

The Labour politician faced criticism from British and Rhodesian MPs at the time, who accused him of ignoring evidence against Mr Mugabe in order to smooth over the negotiations.

Lord Owen’s decision was backed by Mr Callaghan, who said the killings were deplorable but should not “divert us from our efforts to achieve a settlement [with the Patriotic Front].”

Lord Owen told The Sunday Telegraph the true nature of the negotiations had to be kept secret at the time. “I and Mr Callaghan, who was aware of this secret diplomacy involving two very important African countries, believed that this was the best way to deal with the situation on the ground,” he said.

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