



Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you to celebrate our Charity's fifth London Gala Dinner.

This year I am extremely pleased to welcome some good friends who have offered to be our sponsors for this year's events, and I thank them whole heartedly. Their continuing support is all the more appreciated in the present situation of the financial industry worldwide.

Throughout the past year our project of fight against AIDS in Zimbabwe has become not only the most urgent and complex of our running projects, but has also taken on a sense of deepening crisis which is taking a toll not only on the local people but also on all parties related with the ongoing effort of trying and helping them.

By the end of October 2007 we were treating some 1453 patients affected by AIDS. Now this number stands at 1800, spread across four Centres, and our aim for 2008 is to keep this level, facing all possible additional needs.

It is important to state that, as a Charity, we have no interest in politics. We cannot take sides. We are confronted with facts and they are just horrific.

After the presidential election of March 29th, it emerged that a run-off should be held. The date was fixed for June 27th. Ahead of it, the regime unleashed, as promised, its squads of "veterans", Party Youth etc., who were given the results of the vote, village by village, and engaged in assaulting, beating and from time to time killing the persons likely to have voted for the opposition. .

On April 9th the Luisa Guidotti Hospital, our most important centre of intervention, where in excess of 1,000 AIDS patients are taken care of, was "visited" by eight men to this effect. Nurses were dragged away from the sick. All patients who could stand were gathered in the grounds. Then the lecture began. "You messed up when you voted. Next time you vote you must get it right or you will die"

An electoral campaign that began with the tested tactic of beatings evolved into a full-blown military strategy of abductions and murders of opposition activists and supporters. Tens of thousands of people were forced from their homes or had their identity cards destroyed so they could not vote. More than 80 were killed and 200 disappeared.

Mugabe has said time and again he regarded the vote on 27 June not as an election but as a continuation of the liberation struggle against western imperialism and its "puppets".

Very recently he said: "Only God who appointed me will remove me".

And then, on 22 June, Day of drama in Harare, the opposition, under unsustainable violence, had to pull out of the presidential race.

As a result, there has been no change in the leadership of the country.

Destitution, murder, rape and mass beatings are the order of the day.

Nevertheless, our main Hospital continues to perform its tasks and we continue assisting these people.

Dr. Carlo, the Guidotti's resident surgeon and co-ordinator of our projects in Zimbabwe, is in the country and, even if the situation on the ground does not allow him to travel to the main Hospital in Mutoko, he is organizing support for patients and staff and is able to ship medicines, food and the most precious diesel for the hospital's generators.

We are reasonably convinced that, in spite of difficulties created by men, we will succeed in continuing our work that, in Zimbabwe, is directly linked to our patients' existence: If we were to discontinue the treatment, they would die. It is as simple as that!

In this dire situation we have to be thankful to our donors for their trust in our Charity. They allow us to continue in our task by giving us the means to do so. For the people on the ground, doctors, nurses and all staff, this support is vital in order to resist and not flee in fear of retribution. This is really great.

In very simple words, our people there are going through hell but they are continuing to ensure that the sick and poor are cared for. I have to thank them and all of you, who make this possible!

Thank you very much for your support, and for being here tonight!

Sebastiano