

14th JANUARY, 2011—LEST WE FORGET

by Zikinyeho Shuwanga

As the nation of Barotseland, we shall not forget what took place on January 14, 2011. Neither shall we forget many other serious crimes against humanity which successive Zambian governments have committed against us since 24th October 1964. But more importantly, we now shall no longer be blindfolded by BRE and what the traditional ensemble really stands for on the issue of Barotseland.

This January marks exactly 11 years since the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy government led by Mr. Rupiah Bwezani Banda unleashed heavily armed Zambian para-military police onto Barotseland nationals. Some of those murderous police officers were alleged to be Malawians. The target was unarmed Barotse whose only sin was to ask for the restoration of the now defunct Barotseland Agreement of 1964. The wicked Zambian military operation left more than twenty Barotse dead, scores injured, while five are still missing up to date. Over 200 people were arrested and “renditioned” to Senanga, Kaoma, Mumbwa and Lusaka, each of which was 200km away. This was in order to keep the detainees out of their relatives and friends’ reach. In some cases, husbands and wives were arrested, leaving young children alone to fend for themselves. Those who escaped the dragnet went into hiding, some with their children.

Throughout the diabolical operation, the self-appointed and self-recognised traditional leaders of Barotseland, under the ambiguous name of the “Barotse Royal Establishment” (BRE) sat and watched in silence. The Zambian public and largely biased hypocritical civil societies also only watched the Barotse being butchered by the state. Some members of the BRE even encouraged the Zambian authorities to persecute their own citizens.

In the months that followed, a number of healthy Barotse prisoners fell ill due to deplorable Zambian jail conditions. One, a 16 years old youth imprisoned together with adults in Mumbwa, ended up dying in prison, which in itself is a serious crime under international laws. A number of those who were subsequently released shortly thereafter died on medical grounds arising from sicknesses acquired in jail.

AS some of our people called for revenge, it was seen that such a natural human response would only escalate and broaden the hostility to other parts of Zambia or even some neighbouring states, which could have resulted in more bloodshed and untold sorrow. Being a peace loving nation, the only weapon the people of Barotseland could use was their democratic power within the Zambian political system. Thus in the August 2011 elections, that power was exercised, resulting in a popular victory for the Patriotic Front (PF) then led by the late Mr. Michael Sata. Mr. Banda had taken the Barotse for granted and thus suffered a painful defeat for his arrogance and evil heart. The Mr. Sata wasted no time and released all incarcerated Barotse activists.

On the 28th December 2011, he invited Barotse activists to State House where I also participated. He openly told us that he did not have any problem in giving Barotseland back its independence. He further stated that the problem lay with BRE, and that we needed to reach an agreement with the latter before he could act accordingly.

Mr. Sata went another step further by launching a commission of inquiry into the Barotse shootings headed by the renowned and seasoned constitution lawyer, Mr. Roger Chongwe.

During the first anniversary of the shootings, we challenged Mr. Sata, who was in constant touch with us, to publish the Barotseland Agreement 1964 in all national print media in order enlighten skeptical Zambians and the world at large that the abrogation of the Barotseland Agreement 1964 was indeed a legitimate issue, which needed to be peacefully addressed by level minded people, not the likes of Mr. Banda who believed in force, intimidation and fear. He complied and had the Agreement published for a whole week.

On the 24th January 2012, the Barotse activists, largely made up of the Barotseland Freedom Movement (BFM), Linyungandambo and Movement for Restoration of Barotseland Agreement delivered the outcome of the State House meeting with the president to His Majesty the Litunga Lubosi Liwanika II at Limulunga Royal Palace. As was indicated in our report, we also verbally informed the Litunga that Mr Sata had said he had no problems with releasing Barotseland to its owners, the Barotse, but that the problem lay with him as the king. To this, the Litunga suddenly appeared to be surprised and upset. He declared that he would call for the Barotse National Council (BNC) conference to decide on fate of Barotseland.

The BNC, which was allegedly to have been heavily funded by the PF government, met from 26th to 27th March, 2012 where the 1969 Zambian government's unilateral abrogation of the Barotseland Agreement 1964 was officially accepted by Barotseland and, consequently, the roadmap of complete disengagement with Zambia was launched. The conference was attended by among others, some Zambian cabinet ministers and top government officials in politics and all wings of Zambia security forces.

Unfortunately, after the Roger Chongwe Commission finished its work and handed over the report to Mr. Sata, the latter declined to make the report public, indicating a strange change of heart. Not very long after this, the Zambian president fell sick and suddenly died while in office. Elections followed and were won by the Patriotic Front which was led by Mr. Edgar Chagwa Lungu.

The new president soon reversed all the gains made in moving to a peaceful solution over the Barotseland impasse and became very hostile to the activists in particular and the Barotseland people in general. The entire leadership of Linyungandambo was arrested under dubious circumstances and controversially sentenced to 10 years imprisonment, which was extended to 15 years. As did the Banda government, the Lungu administration cast the Barotse activists into prison over a thousand kilometers away from Barotseland. Rumours that the BRE were behind the arrest of the activists were in circulation. To the astonishment of the Barotse, no word came for the release of the detainees from BRE, not even when one of the activists died in prison. The activists, who felt were arrested while following the dictates of the BNC Resolutions never received a single visit from the so called leaders of Barotseland who had also sanctioned the same BNC Resolutions.

If any lesson had to be learned, over the years, and largely since the current Litunga came on the throne, BRE has shown nothing else but betrayal of the cause they have always claimed to be championing. Events mentioned above heavily suggest this sad reality. These undeniable events also clearly show that our traditional leadership, which is BRE, is no longer capable of leading the highly legal issue the unilateral abrogation of Barotseland Agreement 1964. Time has finally exposed the double dealings of this ancient traditional ensemble. It has evidently outlived its usefulness just like all monarchical

government systems the world over. Despite their largely empty threats over their recent personal differences with the United Party for National Development (UPND)'s Mr. Eugene Kapatiso, the BRE alone is incapable of freeing Barotseland from Zambia oppression even if they really would have wanted to do so.

In order to save our valuable monarch, time has come for BRE to now step aside and let the Barotse lead the walk to freedom. The people are now fully aware of BRE's divide and rule tactics, yet all along, using and where possible, blackmailing the equally evil hearted and corrupt short sighted Zambian government officials.