

 **THE AUSTRALIAN**

June 19, 2008 06:59pm AEST

Mugabe's new tactic: kill the opposition's wives

Jan Raath | June 19, 2008

THE wife of the unofficial mayor of Harare was so badly beaten by the mob that dragged her and her four-year-old son from their home that even her brother-in-law struggled to identify the body.

The clothes she was wearing, her distinctive haircut and the blindfold that Zanu (PF) supporters forced her to wear as they firebombed her home gave the only clue to her identity.

Her battered corpse is testament to a brutal new tactic in the suppression of opponents before a presidential run-off vote on June 27.

In the past week the wives of at least three opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) officials have been murdered.

The tactic, as President Mugabe and his generals try to avert electoral defeat, has had the desired effect: the husbands have been rendered useless with terror and grief.

The latest case came a day after Emmanuel Chitoro, 46, was chosen by colleagues from the MDC as the new Mayor of Harare. The party, which won 45 out of 46 of seats on the Harare city council in elections on March 29, was banned from taking office but decided to form its own council on Sunday.

On Tuesday the body of his wife, Abigail, 27, was finally identified in the mortuary of the Parirenyatwa hospital, Harare's largest state health institution, with her head battered beyond recognition.

Two pick-up trucks drove up to the Chitoro home in Hatcliffe Extension, a squatter camp on Harare's eastern outskirts on Monday night, and took away Abigail and Ashley, her son. Mr Chitoro rushed back when neighbours called him to find the house in flames. Neighbours said that they heard three explosions, thought to be petrol bombs.

Mr Chitoro had brought with him Danke Mothae, the director of the observer mission of the Southern African Development Community, to witness the attack.

He found Ashley at a police station on Tuesday. Later that day he was told that the body of a woman had been found on a farm adjoining Hatcliffe. "I knew then that she had been murdered," he said.

He sent his brother, Kumbulani, to collect her but he could not identify it. "He had difficulty identifying her. He wanted to know what clothes she was putting on, and what hairstyle she had," Mr Chitoro said.

"The body was butchered. They had used heavy objects to crush the head. She still had the blindfold that my kid said they put on her head when they took them away." Mr Chitoro described what she had been wearing, and Kumbulani positively identified her.

"I cannot go and see her. I cannot come out in the open. As we speak, Hatcliffe is covered in smoke. They are burning houses of people perceived to be MDC supporters. I don't know who will protect us."

In the last week there have been three reports of local MDC officials who fled their homes from marauding Zanu (PF) mobs and who had their homes burnt down. In each case their wives were put to death, two burnt alive, the other battered to death.

In Epworth, a squatter area east of Harare, rampaging Zanu (PF) mobs burnt down the home of a third MDC councillor in as many nights. It was the same in Chitungwiza, the sprawling township south of the capital.

Zanu (PF) struck again in Jerera, a small administrative town in southeastern Zimbabwe, not two weeks after it opened fire on six MDC supporters in the local party office, poured petrol on to them and set fire to them, killing two instantly. On Tuesday night, said a Catholic nun who asked not to be named, they burnt down the home of the Catholic priest at St Anthony's mission there.

At another Catholic mission farther north, she said, nuns had been ordered to purchase T-shirts bearing Mr Mugabe's face, and wear them over their habits. They were forced to buy Zanu (PF) party cards for Zdollars 20 billion each, worth about 50p in Zimbabwe's worthless currency.

In Harare in the past three days mobs of hundreds of Zanu (PF) supporters have been raiding township markets, smashing vendors' stalls, stealing their goods and forcing them to buy Zanu (PF) party cards as licences. Police have occasionally ventured out to restore order, but arrested none of the perpetrators, said residents.

In the well-off suburb of Chisipite, Zanu (PF) youths abducted the private security guard of the home of a senior British diplomat and assaulted him because he "works for the British", officials said.

The Times

Copyright 2008 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).