

Neighbours urge Zimbabwe to release poll results

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Sunday called on the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) to quickly release the results of presidential elections held two weeks ago as the ZEC bowed to demands from President Robert Mugabe's party for a partial recount.

A wait of more than two weeks for the official results of the March 29 elections has fuelled tensions in Zimbabwe between supporters of Mugabe and opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) leader Morgan Tsvangirai

The MDC claims Tsvangirai won the vote, ending Mugabe's 28-year rule. Mugabe's Zanu-PF says neither won outright and that a runoff election is needed.

In a communique issued after marathon emergency talks on the dispute in the Zambian capital Lusaka, SADC leaders called on all sides to respect the outcome when announced by the ZEC.

If it came to a runoff, 'the Zimbabwe government should ensure that the elections are held in a secure environment', and in strict compliance with the rule of law and SADC electoral standards, SADC said, offering to send an observer team.

In the meantime SADC would send observers to monitor the ongoing vote counting and verification, which has been moved to a secret location and which the bloc said should be open to scrutiny by opposition candidates.

Mugabe boycotted the SADC summit after his party declared there was no need for the meeting because there was 'no crisis'.

SADC's mediator in Zimbabwe, South African President Thabo Mbeki, also took that line after meeting with Mugabe in Harare before the summit, saying the standoff did not constitute a crisis.

Meanwhile, a lawyer for the MDC said that the country's high court has ordered the ZEC to stop recounting the results of March 29 elections.

MDC lawyer Selby Hwacha said his party had approached the court late Friday for a court order against ZEC after it notified the party that it would carry out a recount of votes cast in the combined presidential, parliamentary and local elections.

The MDC objected on the basis that the results of the presidential election have not yet been made public.

'The judge found it not just illegal but grossly unreasonable to order a recount before the result is out. The law is clear about when the recount is done. A candidate requests for a recount within 48 hours after the result has been declared.' Hwacha told DPA.

Earlier, ZEC announced it would undertake a recount of results from 23 constituencies following allegations by Zanu-PF that the MDC bribed election officials to deflate Mugabe's vote - claims the MDC rejects.

The recount of votes cast in the presidential, parliamentary and local elections would take place April 19, the election body had said.

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