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Zimbabwe: Whether the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) is still active in Canada; whether MDC branches outside of Zimbabwe can verify the identity and replace the lost membership cards of those members who were originally issued cards in Zimbabwe; whether the MDC membership cards display the date of original membership; whether MDC branches would report the original membership date if requested; location of other MDC branches and chapters
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Canadian Branches

The former chairperson of the Toronto branch of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), who also chaired the MDC Canada Provincial Steering Committee, provided the Research Directorate with information on the Canadian branches of the MDC and its membership cards during telephone interviews on 6 and 15 April 2011. He explained that the first branch to be established in Canada was MDC Toronto, which was set up on 11 December 2005 (6 Apr. 2011). A branch was also set up in St. Catharines, Ontario, in early 2006 (Former Chairperson 6 Apr. 2011). He added that many members moved to western Canada, creating steering committees to start the process of establishing branches in Edmonton and Calgary (ibid.). Some members also began organizing activities in Vancouver, British Columbia, and Hamilton, Ontario (ibid.).

The effort to establish branches across Canada led to an attempt to have Canada recognized as a provincial arm of the MDC, just as branches in the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) and South Africa are (ibid.). An application was sent to the MDC leadership in Zimbabwe (ibid.). MDC Toronto took the lead because it was better established than the other branches (ibid.), though it had never had physical offices and met in public libraries or the homes of executive members (ibid. 15 Apr. 2011). But in September 2009, the Zimbabwe party leadership turned down their request for provincial status (ibid. 6 Apr. 2011). Although Canadian members were offered the opportunity to become a district of the MDC-United States of America (MDC-USA), itself a provincial-level group of the MDC, the Canadian-based executive believed that such an arrangement would be unworkable and declined the offer (ibid.). As a result, the Canadian branches have been in "limbo" since the end of 2009 (ibid.). However, the former chairperson of MDC Toronto stated that he was aware that some Canadian members wanted to involve themselves with MDC-USA and had become members of the American-based grouping (ibid.).

In 20 April 2011 correspondence with the Research Directorate, the secretariat of MDC-USA likewise indicated that there are no active MDC branches in Canada, but that talks have been held to set up an interim MDC Canadian district. However, unlike MDC Toronto, the US secretariat said that "Canada is a designated district of MDC-USA" and that "we are currently working with interested parties to put in place formal structures which would allow us to have better controls of party activities taking place within Canada" (MDC-USA 20 Apr. 2011).

The MDC-USA secretariat also specified that

Failure of Zimbabwean in Canada to form Districts does not mean those Zimbabweans in Canada are not MDC Members in good standing, meaning are card carrying members with up to date membership subscriptions. A number of Zimbabweans have maintained membership in their Zimbabwean Wards, Districts and Provinces as Membership Cards will attest. (MDC-USA 20 Apr. 2011)

Verification of Zimbabwean Members

The former chairperson explained that it is "almost impossible" to confirm the membership of those MDC members whose cards were issued in Zimbabwe since doing so involves having to contact someone at the issuing branch in Zimbabwe (6 Apr. 2011). He explained that it is very difficult to telephone Zimbabwe (Former Chairperson 6 Apr. 2011). If local representatives can be reached, they are reluctant to provide confirmation due to the "atmosphere of fear" in Zimbabwe (ibid.). He added that the local representatives in Zimbabwe are protective of their members and want to ensure their safety (ibid.). An additional difficulty is that records are not computerized and must be physically checked (ibid.). The former chairperson also said that MDC offices in Zimbabwe are often vandalized and the records destroyed (ibid.).

The former chairperson acknowledged that in the past, when MDC Toronto was first established in December 2005, it was easier to confirm the names of members (ibid.). He stated that it was also easier for the Zimbabwe office to check because they did not have to go as far back in their records as they do now to confirm membership (ibid.). Because individuals could have joined more than six or seven years ago, it is now much more difficult to confirm membership (ibid.).

The MDC-USA secretariat stated that while they can and do verify whether an individual is a member of the MDC-USA, they cannot do so for individuals who have joined elsewhere (20 Apr. 2011). To find out if someone became an MDC member while in Zimbabwe, it is necessary to contact the original branch or district in Zimbabwe from which individuals claim membership (MDC-USA 20 Apr. 2011).

Date of Issue on Membership Cards

The former chairperson stated that information on when someone initially joined the party is not indicated on membership cards, only the date when the card was issued (15 Apr. 2011). He explained that there have been several versions of the card and that the validity period for the different versions has varied, with some valid for a year and others valid for four years (Former

Chairperson 15 Apr. 2011). In 7 April 2011 correspondence with the Research Directorate, he also clarified that, based on the party's constitution and bylaws, membership lapses if members' subscriptions fees are "more than three months in arrears." However, he noted that, except for members who put in their candidacy for positions of responsibility, MDC Toronto rarely enforced this provision (Former Chairperson 15 Apr. 2011).

Replacement of Membership Cards

The MDC-USA secretariat indicate that many Zimbabweans

have continued their membership in Zimbabwe. They have renewed membership and have the same cards obtained on their behalf by relatives and friends after paying the card and subscription fees mentioned above. Replacement of cards is easy for our members [of the MDC-USA]. Those who claim to be members elsewhere we cannot replace their card but can issue a new one based on the date they join one of our Districts. (20 Apr. 2011)

Practice of Issuing Membership Cards

According to the former chairperson, any MDC branch outside Zimbabwe can issue cards, but they must obtain them from the office of the treasurer-general in Harare (6 Apr. 2011). In return for the cards, the branches remit membership fees and donations to the treasurer-general and his deputy (Former Chairperson 6 Apr. 2011). To his knowledge, MDC Toronto was the only branch in Canada issuing membership cards (ibid. 15 Apr. 2011). The Toronto branch continued to issue membership cards until its stock was depleted, with the last such card issued in the first few months of 2011 (ibid. 6 Apr. 2011). However, some MDC members in Canada have cards that were issued in other countries where the MDC is present and so never obtained new cards in Canada (ibid.). He explained that when MDC Toronto was established, they tried to exchange older cards held by members for the cards issued by MDC Toronto to avoid duplication, but stopped doing this (ibid. 15 Apr. 2011).

The former chairperson stated that individuals in Canada could join the Toronto branch by attending MDC meetings or getting in touch with the MDC Toronto treasurer, who was responsible for registering members (ibid.). Officially, potential members are required to be citizens of Zimbabwe, to not belong to any other political party in Zimbabwe and to adhere to the code of conduct of the party (ibid.). He also explained that the membership cards, like those for many political parties in Zimbabwe, were originally issued as a means to raise funds for the MDC and not as a method to prove membership (ibid.). As a result, the membership cards have taken on a "life of their own" (ibid.).

New Version of the Membership Card

The former chairperson stated that the MDC in Zimbabwe began issuing a new version of the membership card in 2010, the fourth such version (ibid. 6 Apr. 2011). Other sources corroborate that a new MDC membership card was launched in Zimbabwe in 2010 (MDC-USA 22 Dec. 2010; Nehanda Radio 9 Sept. 2010; ChangeZimbabwe.com 27 Aug. 2010). According to the online news site ChangeZimbabwe.com, the new card was launched at the end of August 2010 (ibid.). The news site quoted the MDC as stating that "membership registration will also be available on-line for Zimbabweans based outside the country, and

[that] external provinces would receive their cards after registration online" (ibid.). MDC-UK and Ireland members were reportedly concerned about the change because they felt that party structures of those branches that are abroad would be sidestepped (ibid.). However, the former chairperson explained that the idea of registering members online did not go far and was not implemented (15 Apr. 2011). According to him, it was an effort to centralize membership and recruitment which did not take off as originally intended (Former Chairperson 15 Apr. 2011).

The MDC-USA made the new card available at the end of 2010 (MDC-USA 22 Dec. 2010; Nehanda Radio 9 Sept. 2010). The new card replaced the previous version, which was set to expire at the end of 2010 (ibid.; MDC-USA 22 Dec. 2010). According to the chairperson of the MDC-USA, in an article on the MDC-USA website, among the advantages of issuing the new card are being able to provide an "accurate and centralised membership database" as well as "a recognizable form of MDC identity by foreign home offices in adjudication of asylum cases" (ibid.). The MDC-USA chairperson also noted that the previous card "provided an inconclusive membership database" and "'was being used fraudulently by all sorts of imposters who had no relationship or inkling to be members of the MDC'" (ibid.).

The MDC-USA article also provides the following details on the process for issuing membership cards:

The new party card issuing process has a number of firsts compared to the old one. No longer will individual Districts be allowed to keep the cards; there will no longer be any direct exchange of cash for cards as is the current situation. Instead District Treasurers and or their secretaries will maintain a set of registration forms and receipt books. With all the information completed and party card fee and subscription paid, the secretary/treasurer will request the Provincial Treasurer who upon receipt of the information form and subscription will mail the card directly to the address of the member indicated on the registration form. This new process will be the same for both old and new party members. (MDC-USA 22 Dec. 2010)

In an article on the website of Zimbabwean radio station Nehanda Radio, the MDC-USA chairperson stated that the new process for issuing the card "'will regularize our membership, provide [a] one stop data base [which] both the province and the national office can rely on to verify and gauge the strength of our party in real time'" (9 Sept. 2010). The chairperson added that the new card will ensure "a long awaited rationalization and authentication of bona fide members of the party" (Nehanda Radio 9 Sept. 2010). The Nehanda Radio article notes that, "[i]t is no secret that many Zimbabweans claim some form of membership to the MDC or another" (9 Sept. 2010).

The MDC-USA secretariat also explained in their correspondence that the new card is "centrally distributed ... from Harare" and it

has the Members' personal information and Province/District they belong to. They cannot be interchanged as the information shown is particular to that individual. (20 Apr. 2011)

Location of branches

As has been mentioned, the former chairperson stated there are MDC groups in the UK, the US and South Africa, all three of which are recognised as MDC "provinces" (6 Apr. 2011). He explained that there are also MDC members in Australia and in New Zealand, who, like Canada, were denied provincial status in their respective host countries in September 2009 (Former Chairperson 6 Apr. 2011). The MDC-USA secretariat likewise stated that MDC branches, districts and provinces, collectively known as "External Assemblies," are present in the US, the UK and Ireland and South Africa (20 Apr. 2011).

According to media sources, at the beginning of January 2010, the MDC stated its intent to disband its overseas offices over concerns about "financial impropriety," and it suspended the executive of MDC-UK and Ireland amid allegations of corruption (SW Radio 5 Jan. 2010; *New Zimbabwe.com* 2 Jan. 2010). The MDC Treasurer-General expressed concerns that some overseas branches were being run by "'rogue elements'" who were using the MDC name to raise funds but were keeping the money (ibid.; SW Radio 5 Jan. 2010). MDC-UK executives denied the charges, claiming it was instead a disagreement over the remittance of funds (ibid.; *New Zimbabwe.com* 2 Jan. 2010). According to an article on the website of SW Radio, an independent Zimbabwean short wave radio station based in London (SW Radio n.d.), a US-based professor and political commentator alleged that some people at MDC foreign offices were selling party cards and charging asylum seekers for representation (SW Radio 5 Jan. 2010). Further details concerning asylum claims could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact representatives of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in the Zimbabwe and the United Kingdom and Ireland branches were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response. Representatives of the Canadian High Commission in South Africa were unable to provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

Internet Sources, including: Australia - Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT), European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net), Ireland - Refugee Documentation Centre (RDC), MDC - Zimbabwe, MDC - United Kingdom and Ireland (MDC-UK and Ireland), MDC-USA, United Nations (UN) Refworld, United Kingdom (UK) Home Office.

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