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Zimbabwe



Robert Mugabe, British American Tobacco and a Brokered ‘Bribe’

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A surveillance contractor hired by British American Tobacco (BAT) is alleged to have brokered a bribe with Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe’s Zanu-PF party, according to leaked industry documents and a whistleblower.¹

A joint investigation by the University of Bath, BBC Panorama and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism reveals that BAT appears to have been connected to a conspiracy to pay a bribe of between US \$300,000 and \$500,000 to the notorious dictator to let its contractor continue its alleged corporate espionage activities.

Leaked documents suggest initial bribes were paid to Mugabe’s political party, Zanu-PF, to secure a meeting with officials. The documents do not show the larger bribe being paid, but the BBC spoke to three sources who confirmed BAT was aware of the proposal.

The bribe appears to have been proposed by Brigadier General Asher Walter Tapfumaneyi, currently the deputy director general of Zimbabwe’s infamous Central Intelligence Organisation, who had been director at the Ministry of State of Presidential Affairs. Tapfumaneyi told the Bureau of Investigative Journalism: “I have absolutely no knowledge or association with the events, circumstances, persona which you claim to have uncovered, except Zanu-PF. The rest of your story, I am hearing from you for the first time.”²

At the time of the alleged bribe being brokered, Forensic Security Services (FSS) was BAT South Africa (BATSA)’s surveillance contractor. A whistleblower who brokered the negotiations told the BBC’s Panorama that he bribed Zimbabwean officials with FSS funds at its instruction. This facilitated a meeting with the Brigadier to iron out the terms of the proposed US \$300,000 to \$500,000 bribe.³

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It was "laughable" that BAT would not have known about the negotiations, the messenger told BBC Panorama.

Three sources have confirmed that BAT was aware of the alleged brokered bribe. A senior manager of BAT's Southern Africa Anti-Illicit Trade team in its BATSA subsidiary appears to have known of the negotiations, according to leaked emails.⁴

Codenamed "SOS Zim," associated payments for the sensitive work in Zimbabwe were also signed off by a senior BAT employee.⁵ In the case of one operational payment by FSS to the whistleblower, several BATSA staff were forwarded the email which approved the transaction.⁶

Espionage allegations and President Mugabe's wrath

BAT landed in the crosshairs of Mugabe in September 2012 when a surveillance operation targeting rival Zimbabwean tobacco firm Savanna Tobacco was foiled. FSS had subcontracted a detective agency to conduct corporate surveillance in the country.

Three company directors from the detective agency were arrested after the firm's surveillance activities were exposed and charged with conspiring to rob BAT's rivals, a charge which BAT Zimbabwe strongly denied.⁷ State prosecutors alleged the private detectives had supplied intelligence on Savanna Tobacco to criminal syndicates, which had then robbed the company's trucks exporting cigarettes to South Africa. Five other tobacco firms, Breco, Trednet, Cutrag, Kingdom and Chelsea, also claimed to have lost a combined R100 million worth of cigarettes to organized hijackings in South Africa.⁸

Mugabe, then president, publicly condemned BAT for allegedly sabotaging local firms, warning that the "huge case" would affect BAT "very soon" and threatened it with commercial sanctions.⁹

BAT denied the allegations and FSS staff claimed the prosecutions had in fact been fabricated, with some in FSS suspecting that Mugabe's nephew-in-law, Adam Molai, who headed Savanna Tobacco, may have had some involvement in the case.¹⁰

BAT's surveillance operations in Zimbabwe had ground to a halt and, regardless of the evidential strength of the prosecution, the detectives faced a long prison sentence if the matter could not be resolved. FSS desperately needed to resolve the crisis on behalf of its BAT paymasters.

Elections and a proposed 'donation' to President Mugabe

"They [FSS] had fallen foul of the authorities there and needed a very high-level reintroduction so they could plead their case and then have access to the Zimbabwean tobacco industry again," said the messenger.

As FSS had established in neighboring countries, BAT's surveillance contractor sought the cooperation of Zimbabwean law enforcement to "shut down illicit trade and do armed interceptions, arrests and so on," the messenger added. It instead faced a hostile environment in the country which prevented it from carrying out anti-illicit tobacco operations.

The whistleblower, who claims to have met with the Brigadier in late 2012 at a Zanu-PF party conference, appears to have been instructed by FSS to establish a safe travel corridor in order for FSS managers to fly to Harare and meet with Tapfumaneyi to conduct negotiations.¹¹

But a "thick envelope of notes" was expected by the Zimbabweans just to get the FSS managers through the door to prove they were "serious," claimed the messenger. FSS made at least two payments to the messenger which the whistleblower says were used to pay Zimbabwean government officials to "warm them to the idea."^{12,13}

"I made it totally clear [to FSS], if you want access, you're going to have to give me big bunch of cash that I'm going to talk to those guys and plead your case," said the messenger.

The "sweeteners" appear to have worked and an FSS manager got his meeting with the Brigadier in Zimbabwe.¹⁴ Zanu-PF expected a payment in the region of half a million US dollars. With "the upcoming elections," a donation to Zanu-PF would "pave the way for negotiations to continue," stated a leaked FSS document.¹⁵ They could then go back to the president "to get this problem sorted out," it added.

According to the leaked FSS file, the proposed "donation" would be siphoned into a special purpose company under Zanu-PF control.

In early January 2013, shortly after the Brigadier appears to have proposed the release of the directors of the detective agency as a "goodwill gesture," the agents were released from jail. Then in mid-January, an FSS manager emailed FSS staff stating he had "received a urgent request" from a senior BATSA manager from its Southern Africa Anti-Illicit Trade team, whom the TCRG is not naming for legal reasons, to investigate "the Pros and Cons of [a] Donation to the party and joint business venture as discussed."¹⁶

As early as 2000, BAT and its South African subsidiary, BAT South Africa (BATSA), had begun working with FSS. Often with direct involvement of staff from BAT's U.K. headquarters, FSS agents apparently undertook surveillance on BAT's competitors under the guise of monitoring illicit trade activity. The service provider's work extended into neighboring countries, as well. Around 2012, FSS hired a private detective contractor in Zimbabwe to spy on BAT's Zimbabwean competitors, as part of its anti-illicit trade operations. The subcontracted detectives were on FSS' payroll which was financed by BATSA.^{9, 10, 11, 12}

BAT's Southern Africa Anti-Illicit Trade team appears to have had direct and live knowledge of the brokered bribery discussions, according to documentary evidence. Speaking to BBC Panorama, the messenger said that while he was contracted by FSS, "The entire thing was built around British American Tobacco, that was mentioned out in the open and often."

In July 2013, Mugabe once again clung onto power, winning the General Election to further cement his decades-long reign—by which point, the BAT-financed FSS had restarted its surveillance operations in Zimbabwe under the banner of combating illicit tobacco. The messenger, meanwhile, said it was simply "fantasy land" to suggest FSS could have returned to work without a bribe being paid to Zimbabwe's brutal dictator.

BAT did not respond to these allegations when contacted by the BBC. The company has said: "Our efforts in combating illicit trade have been aimed at helping law enforcement agencies in the fight against the criminal trade in tobacco products. In 2016 BAT made public that it was investigating allegations of misconduct and was liaising with the UK Serious Fraud Office (SFO). BAT fully cooperated with the SFO's subsequent investigation, which included allegations relating to South Africa."

For more on this story, see the resources released by the University of Bath's partners on this investigation, BBC Panorama and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism:

[See coverage by the BBC.](#)

[See coverage by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism.](#)

Endnotes

1. Leaked document, De Briefing SIN
2. Brigadier General Asher Walter Tapfumaneyi, Email to Bureau of Investigative Journalism, September 2021
3. Leaked document, De Briefing SIN
4. Leaked document, Re: URGENT challenges
5. Leaked document, FSS INVOICES - JUNE 2013.pdf.docx
6. Leaked Document, RE: SIN APPROVALS
7. <https://www.herald.co.zw/bat-espionage-under-sars-spotlight/>
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10. Leaked document, De Briefing SIN
11. Leaked document, De Briefing SIN
12. Leaked document, Cons List as on 25 September 2013.xlsx
13. Leaked document, Re: SIN APPROVALS
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15. Leaked document, De Briefing SIN
16. Leaked document, Re: URGENT challenges



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