

Ambassador Schultz: I'll talk with everyone

Eric Schultz, US Ambassador to Zambia, has drawn ire from some Zambians for his outspoken remarks on issues of democracy, good governance and free and fair elections, the same things that Zambia says it aspires to as a nation. His remarks are often criticised as “interfering in our domestic affairs”. He talks to CHARLES MAFA.

The United States Ambassador has his photograph taken with hundreds of different people, but when his photograph was taken recently with Miles Sampa, the former deputy commerce minister who resigned from dissatisfaction with the ruling party and now leads the opposition Democratic Front, the verbal bullets started flying.

Last year Mr Schultz was photographed with the musician Chama Fumba, popularly known as Pilato, who composed a song that some PF officials claimed defamed the president, and the ambassador was criticised for that.

Some visitors to the US Embassy's Facebook have questioned why Ambassador Schultz meets with people who oppose government. His answer? “As a diplomat, I have a duty to meet with and listen to everyone”. He told UNZA students last year: “I believe in dialogue, in talking with everyone. That's the best way for me to understand Zambia better.”

In this election year the Ambassador will no doubt be called on to once again explain his country's role if it is seen, rightly or wrongly, to impinge on internal politics. His call for elections to be free and transparent is often mistaken to mean he supports the opposition. He gives a terse shake of his head: “We have no preference for one candidate or one party. We support the (electoral) process.” And he went on to say: “It is essential that elections are seen to be credible,” and that that was one way of avoiding disputes over election results and provided the legitimacy needed to make reforms.

He had a word for journalists as well: “We need to see the media being more even-minded.”

The Ambassador said the need for a presidential candidate to win by more than 50% of the votes, as provided for in the amended constitution, increased the legitimacy of the outcome and could encourage political groups to engage in meaningful dialogue. “It could encourage alliance building – coa-



lition building. It allows politicians to talk to each other.”

Referring to the current level of political disturbance, Mr Schultz said violence has no place in a democracy. He cited in particular the Ndola Airport incident – which resulted in international headlines – when a plane carrying the opposition leader Miles Sampa was blocked by PF cadres from landing on the main runway and was forced to land nearby. Incidents like the takeover of an international airport, said the Ambassador, could have a negative impact on investment and tourism, two immediate important needs for the country.

“Put yourself in the shoes of a visitor. Imagine you're a tourist on that plane visiting the country for the first time. What would be your reaction?” he asked. The cadres beat up Sampa's supporters and airport staff as they confronted the plane on the apron to harass Mr Sampa and his entourage, who were forced to remain aboard. They returned to Lusaka the same day but in an act of defiance Mr Sampa later drove to Kitwe and launched his new party, the Democratic Front, at 22:00hrs.

The US envoy, whose last tour of duty was in the Ukraine after a few years as deputy to the ambassador in Harare, is not alone in his misgivings about current political violence. He joins many people who

have called for tolerance and peaceful co-existence among rival political groups. In their January pastoral letter, the Catholic bishops noted that “Zambia is paying a great price through political hooliganism, and apparently the leadership in all our political parties has failed to uproot political violence.” The bishops said “in some cases they (the leaders) actually seem to encourage and fan it (violence) by inflammatory speeches”. The Catholic bishops want to see the police “sternly but impartially apply the law to quell violence”.

On other matters Mr Schultz said he “was surprised by how quickly the (economic) downturn happened” in Zambia. Unlike Zimbabwe, Zambia's economy had appeared in good shape but the fall in copper prices exposed problems and is compounded by load-shedding, which Mr Schultz believes could have been avoided if investment in electricity generation had been done at the right time. Quoting an African proverb, he said: “The best time to invest in electricity generation was 20 years ago. And the second best time to invest in the sector is now.”

An immediate task for whoever wins the election will be to steady the economic ship and end the energy crisis, Mr Schultz said. It does not matter whether the new

government adopts the IMF programme but the envoy stressed the need “to reduce government spending and prioritise expenditure.” He said however that, “it is easy to be optimistic about the future of the country because of its stability, its rich democratic credentials, and its vibrant young entrepreneurs.”

One of government's main goals, if it is to achieve a bright economic future, should be to have a well-managed education sector. The Ambassador said countries that have emerged as economic success stories in recent decades have devoted time, attention, and money to education. He urged leaders to take a page from the Zimbabwe that existed before that country's huge economic crisis. Zimbabwe then had a competitive education sector with some best schools in the southern region and its economy was booming.

He believes that Zambia is well-positioned to emerge as one of Africa's fastest growing economies if it successfully diversifies into agriculture and tourism. With regard to the latter, he noted that the lack of direct flights from Europe makes it difficult for tourists, especially Americans, to come to Zambia. As a result, the tourism industry is underperforming, recording low tourist arrivals compared to other countries in the region. ■