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Tyrant? You can only be talking about Tony Blair . . .

Daphne Barak was given an exclusive interview with the Zimbabwean president

I MET him at his state house with its beautiful gardens. He broke the peaceful atmosphere by making an entrance with many armoured cars after my arrival. I then had to wait several hours before he appeared. The conversation was pleasant, though he lacked any warmth.

I asked him about the incident with Tony Blair and the Prince of Wales at Pope John Paul II's funeral, one of the rare occasions when he has been able to travel to meet western leaders.

RM: We were allotted seats close to those of the British . . . the United Kingdom begins with U and Zimbabwe is Z, so we are at the bottom of the alphabet and they put us together with Prince Charles and, of course, the prime minister . . . The incident was more between me and the prime minister. We'd never met, but he deserted his seat because he realised that our own seats were next to their own. But Prince Charles remained in place.

He's a real gentleman. We've known each other. All members of the royal family have visited us. They've been to the state house. We were not strangers to each other. So we sat next to each other. I didn't expect the prince would behave in the same crude way as the prime minister . . . We've talked to each other several times. And we always remember that he was the one sent on April 17, 1980 to lower down the British flag in a ceremony at one of our stadiums here. We chatted . . .

DB: *At the funeral?*

RM: We chatted, yes. And of course we reminisced on the past, over the past. And, I assure you, as far as Zimbabwe's concerned, my own government was concerned, we have not changed in attitude. Changed in terms of our respect for the royal family. We've still got them as good friends.

DB: *Was your conversation about politics or social?*

RM: Just social and pleasant.

DB: *Jack Straw's remark regarding the "un-handshake" [Straw says he mistakenly shook Mugabe's hand at a UN summit] . . . That was quite a memorable remark: "I didn't recognise him because it was*

dark."

RM: That's nonsense. Absolutely nonsense. I recognised him immediately. I didn't soil him through the greeting, did I?

DB: *I read an article where [Blair] called you a tyrant.*

RM: Well, look at the two of us . . . When Mozambique was in trouble [Zimbabwe] went to the assistance of Samora Machel, his government and the people of Mozambique to resist this onslaught — this attack on their sovereignty . . . What did Blair and [George W] Bush do in Iraq? They went to destroy the sovereignty of the people in Iraq.

DB: *You are suggesting that if somebody's a tyrant, it's not you . . .*

RM: That Blair is the tyrant! Here the opposition is free to run in an election, and they did so. They got 41 seats . . . I have never been a tyrant in any way that anyone can describe.

DB: *You and your country have received some unfavourable publicity lately. How do you explain the sudden escalation?*

RM: Well, it has always been the British leading the onslaught against Zimbabwe. And this because of the land issue. We disagree with Blair because he reneged on the agreement, the understanding we had reached at Lancaster House when we negotiated our independence, that the British would assist us with funds to enable us to acquire land for a settlement.

DB: *When will you finish?*

RM: My life?

DB: *No. Being president.*

RM: Well, I'm president by virtue of election. I was elected for six years. I've got about two and a half left.

DB: *Is that your last term?*

RM: I want to rest. Yes.

DB: *Is that final or maybe you will change your mind?*

RM: No. I've no thought of changing my mind. I think I want to retire and the party will choose someone else. I'll be in the background within the party and remain in the party.

DB: *What do you think is the biggest misconception about Robert Mugabe?*

RM: It is that they regard me as far too independent . . . I'm popular with the grassroots in Africa and everywhere. Even in South Africa. But . . .

DB: *But not overseas.*

RM: Overseas — because I fought against imperialism. I fought against Anglo-Saxons. It's the Anglo-Saxons. They're out and out racist, which is my problem. And this world is not just Anglo-Saxon, which they must remember — the Bushes and the Blairs — that we also exist in this world.

DB: *What is the most hurtful thing they wrote about you?*

RM: It's the misrepresentation that I'm a tyrant. I'm not.

DB: *That's the most insulting?*

RM: Yeah, yeah. If there was judgment by some supreme power of the three of us — Bush, Blair and Robert Mugabe — I'd be the first to receive greater justice from the Almighty . . . I've killed no one like they are doing. People are dying in Iraq, even Americans dying. And what for?

DB: *Who are your best supporters outside Africa?*

RM: China . . . they are our greatest friends.

DB: *Do you have friends in Europe?*

RM: We have had excellent relations with France, and also Germany. I've been invited to Africa-France meetings, and I've attended them with [Jacques] Chirac. Italy's also a good friend.

DB: *Are you friends with Chirac?*

RM: Yeah, yeah. We have a rapport.

DB: *If I was Tony Blair, what would you tell me?*

RM: I'd tell you that you must change your ways so that we can co-operate . . . We are open for discussion.

DB: *Every discussion includes compromise.*

RM: Well, compromise depends on what you are discussing. On the land question there is no compromise. None at all. No, no, no.

The full interview with Mugabe will be on Five News at 5.55pm today with a special report on Five News tomorrow at 7pm

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