

Hello, and welcome back for another edition of **As It Is** for the first Thursday in September. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Today, we focus on Zimbabwe's leader, Robert Mugabe. What is his history? What has he done well, and not so well, as he has led his nation for over three decades?

And then, some surprising information from the World Health Organization about food and African children. It seems that far too many young people weigh too much, not too little as you might expect. So let's get started and travel to a country of 13 million people in the southern part of Africa.

Robert Mugabe has led Zimbabwe for 33 years. He recently was sworn-in as the country's president for a seventh time. Mr. Mugabe won re-election on July 31st with 61 percent of the votes. But many people say the election may have been dishonest. Months before the voting, he said, "My people need me."

The opposition Movement for Democratic Change party boycotted the swearing-in ceremony earlier this month. At the event, President Mugabe promised to serve Zimbabwe for another five years. That means he will be in office until he is 94 years of age. And, he plans to seek re-election after that. Mr. Mugabe once said he would serve until age 100.

He is the only leader that Zimbabwe has known since it officially gained independence from Britain in 1980. At first, he held the position of prime minister.

Tom Wheeler is a former South African diplomat. He says Robert Mugabe showed promise as a leader in the early 1980s. He rose to power at that time as a freedom fighter. He struggled to end white rule and secure independence for Zimbabwe. But the former diplomat says Mr. Mugabe suffers from pride – that he seems very pleased with himself. He says the president is like other African leaders who could not foresee the possibility of giving up power.

Mr. Wheeler says that in one way, Robert Mugabe is a bright and well educated man who did good things for Zimbabwe in the beginning. But he condemned other actions.

“But there were also some really bad things.”

Mr. Wheeler notes that after Mr. Mugabe came to power, he called on Zimbabweans to forget their racial divisions and work for their future.

In 1982, however, soldiers under his command killed an estimated 20,000 people in an area where many of his opponents lived. His government ordered the seizing of farms that belonged to whites in the late nineteen nineties and early 2000s. Western countries have taken steps against Mr. Mugabe and his aides for more than 10 years to punish what they say are human rights abuses.

Faith Zaba has served as political editor and news editor for the Zimbabwe Independent newspaper. She compares Mr. Mugabe to the sun around which all of the country's political leaders move.

Ms. Zaba says the president has softened a little in his old age. She says he may even be ready to reach out to his opponents in the Movement for Democratic Change.

"In terms of the way he's approaching things, he's not as hard hitting as he was before 2009...That's a different Mugabe we're seeing."

But an opposition activist based in South Africa calls Robert Mugabe a fallen hero. The activist, Kumbirai Muchemwa, accuses him of putting politics above the well-being of average Zimbabweans. He says Mr. Mugabe should have a better plan for the economy. And he says the president does not care for his people.

If you asked the average American what he thinks about African children, he would probably say that most of them live in poverty and are very thin. That average American, and perhaps many other people in the world, would probably be surprised by a recent World Health Organization report that paints a very different picture. Karen Leggett tells us what the report said.

The World Health Organization says there has been a sharp increase in the number of children in developing countries who weigh too much. In African countries, the WHO says the number of overweight or obese children is two times as high as it was 20 years ago.

Around the world, about 43-million children under the age of five were overweight in 2011. Doctors use height, weight and age to measure whether a person is underweight, normal, overweight or obese.

Overweight and obese children are more likely to become overweight and obese adults. The condition can lead to serious health problems like diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

Francesco Branca is the director of the WHO Department of Nutrition for Health and Development. He says people are eating manufactured, or processed, food more often. He says it often has a high sugar, fat and salt content.

The WHO also says people are gaining weight because of city lifestyles. They travel in cars or other vehicles more than on foot. They are less physically active in general.

The WHO says it is common to find poor nutrition and obesity in the same country, the same community and even in the same family. And experts say lowering obesity rates is especially complex in countries that also deal with high rates of infectious diseases.

The WHO has some basic solutions for individuals and countries. The organization says to lower your intake of fat, sugar, salt and processed food. It says eat more fruits and vegetables and increase physical activity.

The WHO says these actions are especially important for children.

And WHO experts say mothers should breastfeed their babies for at least the first six months of life, if possible.

WHO official Francesco Branca says governments should consider providing vitamins for children. He says educational campaigns about problems linked to obesity would also help. And he says government policies should deal with how food is marketed to children.

Mister Branca says food manufacturers must balance quality and taste with the dangers of sugar, fat and salt.

He also said reducing the number of overweight children will not be easy. He says the goal is difficult to meet even in wealthy countries.

The current goal of the WHO's World Health Assembly is to prevent any increase in the percentage of overweight children during the next 12 years.
I'm Karen Leggett.

And I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Thank you for spending some time with us today. We will leave you with the wonderful voice of Carol Lawrence, who celebrates her 78th birthday today. Many remember her for her performance in the Broadway musical "West Side Story" when she sang this classic American song by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. We'll see you next time.

