

## **Mugabe blames West for Zimbabwe's woes**

By MICHAEL HARTNACK, Associated Press Writer

President Robert Mugabe opened a new legislative year Tuesday with a speech to Parliament blaming economic problems on the U.S., Britain and other Western critics of his human rights record.

Zimbabwe is in a state of economic collapse, suffering from the world's highest inflation rate — more than 1,000 percent — and shortages of all basic goods. A quarter of its 16 million people has emigrated since 2000 and millions more are dependent on aid.

"My tribute goes to the gallant people of Zimbabwe for continuing to exhibit great fortitude despite the prevailing economic challenges which are orchestrated by the country's detractors," the 82-year-old president told legislators.

The meltdown is widely blamed on the seizure of white-owned farms which began in 2000 and has been accompanied by a clampdown on the independent press, human rights groups and political opponents.

Mugabe said a national regulating authority would be established in the coming year to monitor electronic communications. Critics say the move will give the secret police extraordinary powers to intercept mail, e-mail, telephone or cell phone communications.

Mugabe said recent rains have raised hope for an "economic turnaround" and a revival of agriculture under new, black holders of land grants. A recent government report said only

40 percent had occupied their farms or small-scale plots, leaving millions of acres derelict and unproductive.

In what has become a ritual, Mugabe, who has ruled Zimbabwe since independence in 1980, blamed the country's woes on his foreign critics.

"We note with concern the continued imposition of illegal sanctions by the European Union and the United States of America at the behest of our erstwhile colonizers," Mugabe said, in reference to Britain.

"We feel proud that we have defeated that strategy that was aimed at the collapse of our economy and the happening of regime change."

The United States and the European Union have imposed travel bans and other targeted sanctions against Mugabe and members of his government.