



Zimbabwe Update - August 2007

'My mother suffered a partial stroke last year. She is immobile and is looked after by a relative. This week the caregiver sent me a text from Mpopoma, a suburb in the city of Bulawayo, Can I send money from Dunedin where I live to buy water?' Bulawayo last had water 7 days ago.

An Otago-based friend asked me to quote this in the next Update.

Life in Zimbabwe has deteriorated from difficult to impossible since the July update. In it I said that there was a window of hope in the form of the Southern Africa Development Community annual summit to be held in August in Lusaka, Zambia. My optimism was misplaced. On Zimbabwe the Summit communiqué stated, 'We noted the Executive Secretary report on Zimbabwe and acknowledged the progress made by South Africa President Thabo Mbeki in mediation talks between the ruling Zanu PF and opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)'.

Millions of Zimbabweans at home and in the Diaspora received this with shock, dejection and some form of helplessness. The reports to the SADC and the South African government have not been made public. The killer statements post-Lusaka came in the form of words from incoming SADC chairman, Zambian President, Levy Mwanawasa. 'Zimbabwe's problems are exaggerated,' he said at a Press conference after being sworn in. A thousand kilometres away, South Africa's long serving Finance Minister Trevor Manuel quipped, 'Zimbabweans must solve their own problems'.

What next?

Mugabe returned to Harare and his Parliament is expected to pass a law that foreign businesses need to cede 51% of shares to the indigenous business people of Zimbabwe. Analysts view this as another land reform related blunder meant to be the 'final nail in the Zimbabwe economy coffin'. Parliament is also expected to pass a law that allows Mugabe to appoint his successor should he decide to retire after March 2008.

Work on the ground suggest the regime is now preparing for the March 2008 general elections which will for the first time in 27 years of Zimbabwe's independence bring local government, parliamentary and presidential elections together. The presidential term of six years has been reduced to match Parliament's five years.

State media reported that the Registrar General department has completed a voter education exercise that ran for two months and added a meagre 80 000 people to the secretly held electoral roll. Some 2 000 officials conducted this exercise. A leading NGO, the Zimbabwe Elections Support Network, has condemned this exercise as flawed, biased towards the ruling party and held over too short a timeframe. Similar echoes have come from Zimbabwe Civic Education Trust and the leading opposition party, MDC.

It is not known when President Thabo Mbeki will next re-convene the MDC-Zanu PF talks but his government has already issued a statement that they are confident Zimbabwe will run free and fair elections in 2008. Harare bragged before the SADC summit that these talks were not necessary adding Zimbabwe 'was a democracy like any other'.

A glaring question in the minds of many is whether the nation will hold up to March 2008 or even December 2007?

The Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum latest report claims that 2007 has been the worst year in terms of repression and state sponsored human rights violations. The most notable case is that of opposition party members spending 71 days in remand cells after which Luke Tamborinyoka wrote a chilling account of his incarceration in two parts:

<http://www.zimonline.co.za/Article.aspx?ArticleId=1874>

<http://www.zimonline.co.za/Article.aspx?ArticleId=1888>

Information Black Out

Following the passing of the Interception of Communications Act, legislation that allows for monitoring of telecommunications and emails, I have observed that NGOs, businesses and friends are now been very concise in their updates. A cloud of fear hovers over them. A recent two page bi-monthly update from CWS partner, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, best illustrates this observation.

Scanning the economic indicators

Since April the Central Statistics Office has been gagged from releasing official monthly inflation data. In a recent memo to banks, the Central Bank Governor, Gideon Gono, gave 7 600% as the current level of inflation. Economic analysts claim it is probably now pegged at 15 000% while the IMF predict it will hit 100 000% by the end of the year.

A \$200 000.00 note was released last month. This is worth NZ\$1.21 as at Wednesday, 21 August 2007. What does it buy? Subject to the availability of diesel, it may buy a one way fare to the city or a kilogram of salt.

Under the plan labelled Operation Reduce Prices, Mugabe's government ordered businesses and service providers countrywide to slash prices by 50% in July. This populist move saw more than 7000 business executives arrested and harassed while shops were completely looted. The short lived 'glory' has left businesses 'dead', collapsing or simply unable to replenish supplies at State Controlled prices.

At the time of writing the Government is reportedly granting authority for businesses to increase prices on basic goods such as cooking oil, beef, sugar, maize meal, transport, power tariffs, and telephone bills. It may well be that government is now eating humble pie and reversing or ditching price controls altogether. It was reported that tariffs on cellphones for example may well be hiked up by 1000%. In the meantime, the shelves are still empty. The lucky few who have relatives and friends in the Diaspora are living on groceries sourced from Zambia, Botswana, South Africa, Mozambique and Malawi while the rich are shopping on a thriving black market. At a recent briefing to the Canterbury University SCM I brought this closer to their minds by citing that it is 'like a Christchurch resident surviving on groceries supplied from Kaitaia!

While electricity is still being delivered to homes for about 4 hours a day, those living in cities such as Bulawayo in the south face another hurdle. Dams are dry thanks to the drought and central government has no plans or capacity to help. Last week the Bulawayo City Council announced that water rationing measures will now extend to business. The taps are dry even if people have money to pay for water.

The World Food Programme has re-issued an appeal for food aid for 4 million Zimbabweans while the UNHCR (the United Nations Refugee Agency) has said they are putting in place contingency measures for a refugee crisis.

The sick in both rural and urban areas are dying in their homes. The health delivery system no longer functions. A minority can access private health care but there are no drugs in most pharmacies. Some people are able to source these from the wider region or overseas.

I doubt schools and colleges due to begin on 4th September will open and or run very effectively. Already teachers have issued a demand for a 400% salary adjustment to cope with the rising cost of living and boarding schools are asking that students bring their own food. I further doubt that many of the 1 in 5 currently employed Zimbabweans will have jobs by the end of October.

Between now and the end of the year, it is the economy that will chart the course of action by the masses. Shelves are empty, the nation is hungry, and industries are closing down. The slightly fit will try and leave the country for anywhere else in the region, with most going to South Africa. The weak will remain home to die or organise. The politics of the stomach will now carry the day. Such politics are immune to radio and TV propaganda, summits, conferences, rallies, land promises, and temporary appeasements such as 50% price cuts.

A Zimbabwe dub poet, Albert Nyathi sums it up well:

**'Bana balambile, bana banoxolo, bana kle nxa' Abantwana balambile,
abantwana bayaquqa, abantwana balambile.'
'The children are hungry, the kids are tired, and they are hungry.'**

Compiled by Mandla Akhe a Zimbabwean journalist, currently working for CWS. Mandla follows events in his motherland with a great passion, living for the day that Zimbabwe will begin again to move towards being the democratic and prosperous state it should be. August 2007