

Zimbabwe update

In this month's update we focus on the continued political stalemate over the implementation of Zimbabwe's Global Political Agreement and controversial moves to reduce the country's debt. We also focus on the ongoing food shortages, arrests of activists and disagreements between the Government and food giant Nestle.

You can find more details about all of the stories covered on the [ACTSA website](#).

Political deadlock continues

The political stalemate over a number of outstanding issues in the Global Political Agreement (GPA) continued in January. Agreement over the key appointments of Agriculture Minister, Governor of the Reserve Bank and Attorney General as well as the continued human rights abuses, targeted measures and western radio broadcasts remain unresolved.

On 14th January the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Security Organ Troika met to discuss the implementation of the GPA. President Zuma, who is leading the mediation team called for progress ahead of the proposed 2011 elections. Prime Minister Tsvangirai responded that the election date should be set by the President and Prime Minister following a referendum on a proposed constitution, as stated in the GPA. A Gallup poll in early January found that only 11 per cent of those surveyed thought an election would solve the political situation and be free and fair.

Zimbabwe applies for highly indebted poor country status

Finance Minister Tendai Biti was once again promoting the idea of Zimbabwe applying for Highly Indebted Poor Country Status (HIPC) following a meeting with the African Development Bank (AfDB) on 18th January.

Tendai Biti is being assisted by the AfDB in devising a debt relief strategy to cancel the country's \$5.7 billion of international debt and bring international finance into Zimbabwe. Tendai Biti said "there is no consensus position yet in the cabinet, but I've said give me an alternative that allows us to get this debt serviced without prejudicing our meagre resources."

Although HIPC status can allow countries to apply for significant loans in the short term it can also result in the government having to comply with strict Structural Adjustment Programme regulations such as the privatisation of public services.

Many in civil society including the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) have called for a full audit of the nation's debt and assets in order to ascertain the legitimacy of Zimbabwe's debt.

Roy Bennett trial resumes

The trial of MDC Treasurer General Roy Bennett restarted in January. The former commercial farmer was arrested in February 2008 on charges of banditry, terrorism and insurgency on the day he was meant to be sworn in as Deputy Minister for Agriculture. It is alleged that he paid arms dealer Michael Hitschmann for weapons intended to assassinate President Robert Mugabe. If convicted he will face life imprisonment.

The case has been turbulent so far, with Hitschmann, a witness for the prosecution, claiming that his statements were forced out of him by state agents who tortured him. The prosecution have since accused the defence of influencing Hitschmann's testimony and have sought to withdraw him as a witness. Justice Bhunu has stated that Hitschmann's statements that may have been made under duress will not be counted in Bennett's trial and agreeing with

NEWS IN BRIEF

Public service pay talks continue

Ongoing discussions over the salaries of Zimbabwe's public sector workers due to take place on 26th January have been postponed to 2nd February so negotiations can be expanded to include the teachers unions. Most civil servants are currently paid between US\$155 and US\$180 per month but according to the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe a family of six now needs about US\$500 to survive each month. After months of negotiation Civil Service Minister Eliphas Mukonoweshuro voiced optimism as to an agreement, saying a solution is in everyone's interest.

High Court dismisses SADC land ruling

Zimbabwe's High Court on 26th January dismissed a ruling by SADC's human rights court that the Government's land grab campaign was unlawful. Justice Patel said the regional tribunal's ruling would have no effect in Zimbabwe because it went against domestic law and would cause political upheaval. Prior to the ruling the MDC had raised concerns about the ongoing farm invasions.

the prosecution's accusation that Hirschmann was 'unfavourably indisposed in favour of the accused'.

Nestle reopens its Zimbabwe factory

Swiss multinational Nestle has re-opened its factory in Zimbabwe after a brief closure in December due to Government pressure. Following international pressure Nestle stopped dealing with a number of controversial suppliers in October including the Gushungo Farm which is allegedly owned by Mugabe's wife. Since then the factory has been under pressure to reinstate supply deals and has received numerous visits from government officials and the police including the company's executives being held for questioning by the police.

Nestle has been operating in Zimbabwe for 50 years and employs over 200 people, raising further concerns about unemployment in a country where 90 per cent of the population is unemployed. Industry and Commerce Minister Welshman Ncube commented "We cannot afford to lose investors at this stage when we are rebuilding the economy." The situation was resolved through talks between Nestle and the Government resulting in written guarantees from Ncube of no further interference.

Lack of rain could lead to food shortages

Fears of new food shortages have emerged in Zimbabwe due to the recent lack of rains. Maize, the staple of the Zimbabwean diet, has been worst effected by the combination of a lack of rain, fertiliser shortages, power cuts and late planting, leaving the crops devastated.

The Government had initially predicted an increase of 50 per cent of maize production this year following a 10 per cent increase last year. The lack of rain has affected many parts of the country including the major farming areas of Mashonaland East and the Central provinces. However, the area around Harare has seen higher levels of rain.

Droughts have been an issue in Zimbabwe for the last five years especially in 2008 when millions of people faced major food shortages. The National Association of Non Governmental Organisations' (NANGO) advocacy manager Machinda Marongwe called on the Government to work with the organisation to address the situation in rural areas. "Our caucus is aimed at finding ways to support strategic interventions to respond to the challenges at hand." NANGO feel that an estimated 2.5 million Zimbabweans need food aid and fear the situation could become unmanageable especially in the rural areas.

ACTION

Dignity! Period

Access to sanitary products for women in Zimbabwe is worse than ever, for many women sanitary protection is a luxury they can no longer afford. Women have been forced to use newspaper, rags or leaves as a substitute for sanitary pads which can cause serious infections for which there is no available medication.

ACTSA's Dignity! Period campaign provides sanitary towels to women in Zimbabwe, just £3 a month provides sanitary towels for three women for a year. Visit ACTSA's Dignity! Period web pages to make a donation or learn more.

Student activists beaten

Two student activists at the National University of Science and Technology (NUST) were detained for three days and beaten by police in Bulawayo. Brian Mtisi and Joram Chikwadze were accused of inciting violence after leading a group of students to hear the case of an accountant accused of defrauding the university of student fees.

WOZA members arrested

Three members of Women and Men of Zimbabwe Arise were arrested on 18th January after marching to the Ministry of Education to present a report on education in Zimbabwe. Riot police dispersed the demonstration as it arrived at Ministry of Education and before a delegation were due to present their demands to the minister.

Constitution outreach programme delayed

Zimbabwe's Constitutional Parliamentary Committee said on the 21st January that a lack of agreement over funding and rapporteurs for the process had resulted in the postponement of the consultation process. Some in civil society oppose the government-led process including the ZCTU who are calling for an independent, democratic and people-driven constitutional process to be initiated.