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Zahid Aqil

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Summary of Report

Elections & Governance

Tsvangirai says Zimbabwe is Making Slow Progress

Zimbabwe Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai says there is slow progress towards democracy, with many serious political and economic problems outstanding.

Analyst Sees Zimbabwe's Referendum, Election in Doubt

A social commentator said a majority of Zimbabweans are concerned the anticipated national referendum on a new constitution, as well as the next general election, could be derailed due to lack of funds.

Politics

Lawyers for Malawi's Ailing Former President to go to Court Monday

An attorney for Malawi's former President Bakili Muluzi has told VOA defense lawyers will go to court Monday to agree on a date to enter a plea to the former leader's corruption charges.

Economy & Energy

SOUTHERN AFRICA: Social transfers reduce poverty

Southern African countries have some of the world's worst income distribution, but can often afford social transfers, which have proved an efficient means of reducing the number of poor, regional experts said at a two-day meeting in Pretoria, South Africa.

S. Africa offers enticements to end strike formally

South Africa's government has offered new enticements to 1.3 million state workers to accept a wage offer and formally end a strike which they suspended last week, union officials said on Tuesday. The government has not changed its basic offer but would try to lessen the pain of lost wages felt by striking workers.

Human Rights, Social Issues & Developments

ZIMBABWE: No temporary teachers, less schooling

A recent government directive forbidding unqualified temporary teachers from resuming their duty this (third) term - estimated to comprise as much as 60 percent of the staff complement at rural schools - is causing severe disruptions to education.

In Brief: Zimbabwe revokes leave for school-going mothers and fathers

Zimbabwe's education ministry has backtracked on a new policy, introduced in August 2010, to grant pregnant schoolgirls and the prospective fathers maternity and paternity leave from school, and has opted for disciplinary measures instead.

Senior Striking Air Zimbabwe Pilots Disciplined

The executive board of the striking Zimbabwe Pilots Association is going through disciplinary hearings in Harare. The board's eight members have been fired, according to Air Zimbabwe.

Volunteers Arrested in Zimbabwe Released on Bail

Six church volunteers, who run two clinics for people with AIDS and AIDS orphans, arrested in Zimbabwe have been released on bail by a Harare court. The volunteers' lawyer Jonathan Samukanga says his clients were charged with practicing without required medical licenses.

Zimbabwe court frees U.S. health workers on bail

A Zimbabwe court released on bail on Monday six health workers, including four from the United States, accused of dispensing AIDS drugs without a licence.

Food Security & Health Issues

S. Africa charges Netcare over organ transplants

South African authorities charged Netcare and its chief executive with offences related to organ transplants at a Durban hospital. It said the national prosecutor's office charged it with violating regulations on transplants performed at the hospital in 2001 and 2002.

SOUTH AFRICA: Early HIV treatment may be cheaper than thought

Research by South Africa's University of the Witwatersrand and Boston University in the US, has found that starting HIV-positive people on antiretrovirals (ARVs) earlier, and at a higher CD4 count (a measure of immune system strength), may be cheaper than previously thought.

Refugees/IDPs & Migration**SOUTH AFRICA: Hollow promise of permits for Zimbabweans**

South Africa is to resume the deportation of Zimbabweans on 1 January 2011, on the basis that conditions in their home country have improved sufficiently, while those with valid documents will be issued with permits to stay. This is a welcome promise, activists say, but hard to implement and irrelevant to most expatriates.

Detailed Report

Elections & Governance

Tsvangirai says Zimbabwe is Making Slow Progress

(Voice of America)

16 September 2010

Zimbabwe Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai says there is slow progress towards democracy, with many serious political and economic problems outstanding.

Speaking at an investment conference, Zimbabwe Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai said some people 's impatience with the slow pace of reform had forgotten how bad it had been in Zimbabwe in the past Decade.

"Just as I share your frustrations at the slow place of reform and progress within our society," Mr. Tsvangirai said. "Today, 18 months since the formation of the inclusive government, it is easy to forget the madness of the previous decade. It is easy within the context of frustrated potential to forget exactly what was done to our country, its people and its enormous prospects."

He said the policies of the previous Zanu-PF government were designed to keep it in power.

"For more than 10 years prior to this, public policy was dictated by partisan survival interests," Mr. Tsvangirai said. "Growth was substituted for looting; security was replaced by oppression; inflation destroyed people's pensions, savings and lives."

Mr. Tsvangirai said the road forward for the inclusive government has been difficult, even though most children are back in school with books, hospitals have reopened with medicine, hyper-inflation is gone, and there is far less violence.

"Does this mean that the madness of previous years has been completely eradicated? No! Because we are in a coalition government with those we do not share a common vision of the future," Mr. Tsvangirai said. "The failed policies of the past continue to haunt us. Disdain for the rule of law and property rights continue to undermine our image as a safe investment destination."

He told the conference the present coalition administration is a transitional authority that will take Zimbabwe to a new constitution and fresh elections.

Analyst Sees Zimbabwe's Referendum, Election in Doubt

(Voice of America)

13 September 2010

A social commentator said a majority of Zimbabweans are concerned the anticipated national referendum on a new constitution, as well as the next general election, could be derailed due to lack of funds.

Rejoice Mgwanya told VOA from Harare the unity government has so far failed to meet civil servants' demand for a better pay increase.

"There is so much disenchantment in the civil service in that they can't get an increase in salaries. At the same time, industry is complaining about timid liquidity in the banking sector, which has no money. But, ZANU-PF keeps talking about the possibility of a referendum this year and election next year," he said.

Mgwanya also said that Zimbabweans are convinced that "these two events (the referendum and election), barring any miracles, are not going to happen."

The U.N. Development Program (UNDP) has been helping to fund Zimbabwe's constitutional reform process that is scheduled to lead to both the referendum and the general election.

Officials of the unity government have not yet decided whether the referendum will be held this year or early next year ahead of the general election.

Mgwanya said the international community appears to have little interest in funding Zimbabwe's election.

"It's very unlikely that the international community, that has been very reluctant to promote a very simple constitutional outreach, might end up sustaining a \$200 million exercise. So, we don't see a scenario where the international community will support this massive and mammoth project."

Zimbabwe's embattled President, Robert Mugabe, was quoted as saying he wants improved ties with both the United States and the European Union. But, he has insisted on continuing with his controversial indigenization policy requiring all businesses to have a majority of black shareholders.

The Zimbabwean leader has often blamed the West for his country's economic problems.

Politics

Lawyers for Malawi's Ailing Former President to go to Court Monday

(Voice of America)

12 September 2010

An attorney for Malawi's former President Bakili Muluzi has told VOA defense lawyers will go to court Monday to agree on a date to enter a plea to the former leader's corruption charges.

Attorney Jai Banda said former President Muluzi is not medically fit to stand trial.

"The case was actually set down last week Friday but, then, Friday was a holiday here in Malawi, so we couldn't (go) to court and that is why we are going today. When we go today, it's basically to go and agree on a date of entering (a) plea," he said.

Mr. Muluzi was initially charged with 86 counts of corruption following his arrest in 2009 after he was accused of stealing \$12 million worth of aid funds. But, the charges were later reduced to 12m counts.

The former Malawian leader has denied the charges describing them as a political witch-hunt after his acrimonious fallout with current President Bingu Wa Mutharika.

He was quoted by a local newspaper as saying, "I have been strongly advised to avoid strenuous activity and extensive and prolonged sitting and that I should return to hospital in two months time. What the ACB (Anti-Corruption Bureau) is doing to me is not prosecution, but persecution and torture. I am tired of this political persecution by the ACB."

Critics say the former leader, who has a history of back problems, is feigning illness to avoid prosecution after allegedly stealing donor funds meant for Malawi's poor.

Attorney Banda rejected the accusation saying Mr. Muluzi is not feigning illness to avoid the charges adding that the defense team has evidence to prove its case in court that the former leader is innocent of all the charges against him.

"The evidence we have got is that the former president is not fit to stand trial, and we are going to bring all those things to the attention of the court. We are already prepared for that and, when the time comes, we are going to make sure that we bring them to the attention of the court and nab the way forward," Banda said.

Economy & Energy

SOUTHERN AFRICA: Social transfers reduce poverty

(IRIN)

17 September 2010

Pretoria, 17 September 2010 (IRIN) - Southern African countries have some of the world's worst income distribution, but can often afford social transfers, which have proved an efficient means of reducing the number of poor, regional experts said at a two-day meeting in Pretoria, South Africa.

"Money can always be found – where there is political will there is always a way," said Nicholas Freeland, director of the Johannesburg-based Regional Hunger and Vulnerability Programme (RHVP) funded by the UK and Australian governments, and one of the co-hosts of the meeting.

Social transfers cover the various forms of social assistance for low-income or no-income individuals and households, and can include child support grants, non-contributory pensions, school feeding schemes, and agricultural or other inputs.

Six countries in Southern Africa – Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia, South Africa and Swaziland – provide non-contributory social pensions modelled on European social welfare policies. Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia, among others, are experimenting with some cash transfer programmes.

Poor countries show the way

Poor revenue reserves and lack of capacity often stand in the way of cash social transfers. Experts at the meeting lauded the political will of poor countries like Lesotho and Swaziland, whose successful pension programmes make the most of their limited resources.

Lesotho provides a large pension of US\$25, but has a high eligibility age of 70 years to make it affordable, noted one of a series of papers produced by the RHVP, in collaboration with the South Africa-based Economic Policy Research Institute (EPRI) and the IDS. "Swaziland, on the other hand, decided on a low eligibility age (60 years) to widen access, but set the pension level much lower (\$10)."

Evidence has shown that more money in people's hands means they spend more on basic needs such as food, health and education, which has helped both countries to advance towards meeting the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving poverty by 2015.

Policy-makers at the meeting, which ended on 17 September, reviewed the role of social transfers in reducing poverty, ahead of the UN summit on MDGs in New York. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights includes the right to social security.

Lagging behind

Southern Africa is lagging behind on most MDGs: about 45 percent of its people live on less than one US dollar a day, and life expectancy in countries with high HIV prevalence rates has dropped to below 40 years, said Agostinho Zacarias, the UN resident coordinator in South Africa.

Social transfers generally fall into two categories: long-term transfers, which target people who face life-cycle risks, such as orphaned children; and short-term transfers, which include social insurance for those who face livelihood risks, such as farmers who have had a particularly bad harvest, said Stephen Devereux, of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the UK-based University of Sussex.

In South Africa, social transfers like old-age pensions, and the child support grants introduced in the early 1990s, have managed to improve the lot of at least 47 percent of people living on less than two dollars a day, said another papers in the series.

Lovemore Moyo, Speaker of the Zimbabwean parliament, commented: "A country like ours does not have the funds and the resources to put such social transfer programmes in place."

Domestic savings

Zacarias said countries like Zimbabwe needed to work on building the confidence of the people in government policies to improve their domestic savings, "So you know that the money will be spent where it should, and not diverted elsewhere." He made the point that countries needed to spend on social transfers because "we are social beings", and to show that we care about other human beings.

RHVP's Freeland pointed out that at the time when developed countries like the UK and Sweden introduced social transfers such as old-age pensions, they had not been particularly well-off but had gone ahead because of the "huge inequalities" that existed. Devereux noted that Lesotho went ahead with its social transfers programme without the support of donors.

The papers released at the meeting cited a recent study by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) of 12 low-income countries – six in sub-Saharan Africa and six in Asia – which put the cost of providing social pensions at less than one percent of the gross domestic product in each country.

RHVP's Freeland said donors could help out with start-up costs, which were often formidable. "They could pay for smart cards, registration of beneficiaries, and monitoring and evaluation of the transfers, but the actual transfers must come out of the country's budget."

Sylvia Masebo, a Zambian parliamentarian, highlighted the need for political commitment to social transfers. Many countries, including Zambia, depend on donor

support, but "The government allocates the money according to its own priorities and hardly any of it goes towards social protection."

Beyond pilots

Zambia is piloting a cash transfer programme in some of its districts. "The government says we do not have the money to roll out the pilot programme, we need to exploit our domestic revenue base such as the mining sector to raise the money," Masebo commented.

Experts said countries needed to move beyond pilot programmes. "Studies have shown that the administrative costs of running pilots are far greater than running a national social transfer programme," said Isobel Frye, director of the South Africa-based Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII)

Well-known South African activist Mark Heywood, of Section 27, a local civil rights organization, cited the long campaign to roll out treatment for people with HIV/AIDS as the one to emulate to get governments to provide social transfers. "We found that if you get the people who need it the most to campaign for it, it works."

The event was co-hosted by RHVP, the Southern Africa Development Community Parliamentary Forum and the SPII.

S. Africa offers enticements to end strike formally

(Alert Net)

14 September 2010

JOHANNESBURG, Sept 14 (Reuters) - South Africa's government has offered new enticements to 1.3 million state workers to accept a wage offer and formally end a strike which they suspended last week, union officials said on Tuesday.

The government has not changed its basic offer but would try to lessen the pain of lost wages felt by striking workers.

"The employer has agreed to spread out the 'no work, no pay' principle over three months and this will likely convince members to accept the deal," said Manie de Clercq, spokesman for the Public Servants Association.

"Unions have not signed the deal yet but many are close to finalising consultations with their members and we are likely to have a settlement," he told Reuters.

Last week, the state employees suspended their nearly month-long strike for 21 days and returned to work to consider the government's offer of a 7.5 percent pay raise and 800 rand a month for housing.

Workers are due to suffer big deductions to their pay this month to account for days they did not work. But the government has suggested making smaller deductions instead, spread over three months' pay cheques.

Union leaders have already agreed to the government's pay offer but have had problems persuading their members to sign off on the deal. Any offer to spread the pain of lost wages would help the deal to win acceptance, union officials said.

"It's not easy but we are doing our best to make workers see that the government cannot afford to raise the offer. This is as good as it is going to get," said one union official, who did not want to be named.

Any wage rise deal with swell state spending and put pressure on the government to consider tax increases.

Economists predicted that the labour action had so far cost the economy about 1 billion rand (\$140 million) a day and dampened sentiment about growth prospects for an economy already lagging behind other emerging markets.

The strike strained relations between President Jacob Zuma and the largest union federation, COSATU, which helped his rise to power. They will try to patch things up at a high-level meeting to be held in the next two months.

The public sector strike cost an estimated 12 million worker days, bringing the total days lost to strikes this year to 13.25 million -- more than four times the number in 2009, said analyst Jackie Kelly at labour consultancy Andrew Levy and Associates.

Human Rights, Social Issues & Developments

ZIMBABWE: No temporary teachers, less schooling

(IRIN)

15 September 2010

Harare, 15 September 2010 (IRIN) - A recent government directive forbidding unqualified teachers - estimated to comprise as much as 60 percent of the staff complement at rural schools - is causing severe disruptions to education.

"It is surprising that the government has chosen to stop temporary teachers from resuming duty this [third] term, when it is well known that they form the bulk of teaching staff in rural areas," said Janet Chikawa, a teacher at a secondary school in Seke district, about 50 km south of the capital, Harare.

"At my school 10 untrained teachers did not come back, and as a result, six subjects are not being taught. Students spend most of their time doing nothing," she told IRIN.

"Stopping the temporary teachers also means overstressing the few qualified teachers, since we are being forced to teach extra subjects, some of which we did not study in college."

Chikawa and her colleagues have been demoralized by the extra workload, while their US\$150 monthly salary has remained unchanged. She said some teachers were asking parents to pay extra in the form of chickens and maize, especially for pupils preparing to write final exams in the next month.

Raymond Majongwe, secretary general of the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe (PTUZ), said the government directive was "a complete disaster". The Zimbabwe Teachers Association (ZIMTA) estimates a ratio of about 40 pupils to one teacher.

Hard hit rural areas

"There is a growing trend whereby the government makes decisions that harm students, and we wonder who has advised the authorities to bar temporary teachers. Rural areas are the hardest hit, and the more remote an area is, the less the number of qualified teachers there are at schools in that area," Majongwe told IRIN.

"We have been informed that there are schools where there are no teachers at all, particularly in such provinces as Mashonaland Central, Matabeleland North and the Midlands, because all the teachers there were unqualified."

Zimbabwe's education system - once regarded as one of sub-Saharan Africa's finest - has been hit by numerous shocks since 2000, brought on by the country's rapid economic decline, political violence, and the resulting migration of qualified teachers to neighbouring states, as well as further afield to countries such as Britain.

"It would be a miracle to find qualified teachers to fill the gaps left, but even if that were to happen, it would confuse the students, because a new teacher will not be able ensure continuity in the learning process," said Brighton Jaricha, a senior teacher at a rural school about 90 km northwest of Harare in Mashonaland West Province.

"I also foresee a situation whereby the government will reverse its decision, but it will be too late and there will be much confusion," he told IRIN.

"Teachers may decide to go on strike because their salaries are still low, and there are no indications that they be better any time soon. If that happens, it will reverse whatever little gains could have been made in education from last year [2009], when our situation started to look up," Jaricha said.

Household chores replace education

The disruption in schooling is confusing Simpson Machaya, 10, who wants to return to school for the third term but instead is helping his father, a fresh produce seller, to tend their vegetable garden and milk their single cow.

"My son is pained that he is not attending school with the other children, and when he is not doing household chores he reads everything that he can lay his hands on because he loves school so much," said his father, Simon Machaya.

"It is unfortunate that Simpson, just like many children from this area, cannot attend school because the teachers who were teaching them have been told by the government not to report for duty. There is no problem with school fees because some NGOs are taking care of that," Simon said.

Humanitarian organizations run numerous education support projects, from assisting parents to pay school fees to providing school uniforms. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) recently donated 13 million textbooks to 5,500 schools throughout the country, and also supplied free exercise books.

"The numerous efforts by the humanitarian community to help our education system are encouraging," Majongwe said. "But for as long as the government does not put its house in order, they will count for nothing."

In Brief: Zimbabwe revokes leave for school-going mothers and fathers

(IRIN)

14 September 2010

Harare, 14 September 2010 (IRIN) - Zimbabwe's education ministry has backtracked on a new policy, introduced in August 2010, to grant pregnant schoolgirls and the prospective fathers maternity and paternity leave from school, and has opted for disciplinary measures instead.

"Learners in all schools may be suspended, excluded or expelled from school for various acts of misconduct of a serious nature," Stephen Mahere, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts and Culture, said in a circular.

"Pregnancy of a learner, and being responsible for it, are such an example of misdemeanour of a serious nature. The law provides for the exclusion of a learner who falls pregnant, and expulsion of a learner responsible for it," the circular warned.

After consultations between the school and parents or guardians, a girl could be readmitted to school three months after a baby's birth at the grade or form she had been in before she had the baby, Mahere said.

However, the boy responsible for the pregnancy would be considered for admission at another school, and only after a period of 12 months.

"It should be noted that re-admission of the boy learner is not automatic, as approval would have to be sought and granted from the ministry of education before re-admission in any other formal school," the circular said.

"There cannot be maternity or paternity leave for learners in schools. In this regard, it can only be exclusion or expulsion from school."

Senior Striking Air Zimbabwe Pilots Disciplined

(Voice of America)
2010

15 September

The executive board of the striking Zimbabwe Pilots Association is going through disciplinary hearings in Harare. The board's eight members have been fired, according to Air Zimbabwe.

Well-placed aviation sources in Harare report that the eight pilots have handed over their uniforms and other Air Zimbabwe paraphernalia in their possession.

The 40 pilots employed by Air Zimbabwe went on strike last week to protest what they say are unpaid allowances that have been outstanding for many months. The pilots ignored a weekend deadline to return to duty.

Air Zimbabwe Board Chairman Jonathan Kadzura said Tuesday the airline invoked the nation's labor laws against 40 striking pilots, but it is unclear whether all have been fired.

Air Zimbabwe, like most Zimbabwe-government enterprises, has been in financial difficulties for at least the past 10 years.

The airline says it has hired other aircraft and crews for its domestic and regional routes during the strike. Its most profitable route is to London and it has been diverting hundreds of passengers to the United Kingdom via Johannesburg.

The pilots' strike is one of the first major work stoppages by civil servants since the unity government came to power in February last year.

President Robert Mugabe and scores of his aides are due to fly Friday to New York for the U.N. General Assembly meeting. Air Zimbabwe's fleet of aircraft are old and the interiors are shabby but the airline has a good safety record.

Volunteers Arrested in Zimbabwe Released on Bail

(Voice of America)

13 September 2010

Six church volunteers arrested in Zimbabwe have been released on bail by a Harare court.

The volunteers' lawyer Jonathan Samukanga says his clients were charged with practicing without required medical licenses.

"They were practicing without Zimbabwean doctor certificates and that they were dispensing drugs without a pharmacist present or a [dispensing] certificate," Lawyer Samukanga said.

The group, four Americans, one New Zealander and one Zimbabwean, work for the Allen Temple Baptist Church in the United States, which runs two clinics for people with AIDS and AIDS orphans.

The church first began working in Zimbabwe to years ago, and works with non-governmental organizations in the country. Volunteers from the church headquarters in Oakland, California visit Zimbabwe every three months to assess their programs.

Church officials say they have worked closely with Zimbabwe authorities and the issue of licenses has never been raised before.

In a statement, the U.S. Embassy said officials are monitoring the case and attended the bail hearing.

Lawyer Samukanga told VOA that even though the case is supposed to resume at the end of the month, he hopes it can be brought forward to later this week.

Zimbabwe court frees U.S. health workers on bail

(Alert Net)

13 September 2010

HARARE, Sept 13 (Reuters) - A Zimbabwe court released on bail on Monday six health workers, including four from the United States, accused of dispensing AIDS drugs without a licence.

The six, who were each freed on \$200 bail, are members of a Californian-based Christian volunteer health service which runs two clinics in Zimbabwe working with AIDS orphans and HIV positive patients.

Zimbabwe has one of the highest HIV rates in the world and the destruction of its public health system during a decade of economic crisis has left it largely dependent on donor organisations and church-based institutions for essential health services.

The group, who deny the charges, comprise a doctor, two nurses and a community volunteer from the United States plus a Zimbabwean doctor and another from New Zealand.

They were arrested in Harare on Friday on charges of dispensing medicines to AIDS patients at unlicensed premises and doing so without the supervision of a pharmacist. Magistrate Munamoto Mutezo scheduled their case to be heard on Sept. 27.

The health workers' lawyer, Jonathan Samkange, said they faced a fine if found guilty. "It (the prosecution's case) is very poor. I'm actually embarrassed that the state has decided to charge them," Samkange told reporters.

Food Security & Health Issues

S. Africa charges Netcare over organ transplants

(Alert Net)

16 September 2010

JOHANNESBURG, Sept 16 (Reuters) - South African authorities charged Netcare <NTCJ.J> and its chief executive with offences related to organ transplants at a Durban hospital, the private hospital group said in a statement on Thursday.

Netcare, which runs private hospitals in South Africa and Britain, has denied the charges.

It said the national prosecutors office charged it with violating regulations on transplants performed at the hospital in 2001 and 2002.

It did not provide further detail on the suspected violations and South Africa's National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) also declined comment on the details of the case.

"The allegations made are unjustified and... neither Netcare nor (CEO Richard) Friedland are guilty of any wrongdoing," Netcare said in the statement.

Local media reported on the case in 2003, saying investigators were looking into suspected payments for organ donations by poor people.

"All I can say is, it is a matter that we're looking at, we can't comment any further because not all the people have been served with summons," said Mthunzi Mhaga, spokesman for the NPA.

Shares in Netcare fell 1.8 percent to 13.56 rand by 1230 GMT, lagging a 0.3 percent fall in the JSE All-share index <.JALSH>.

SOUTH AFRICA: Early HIV treatment may be cheaper than thought

(Alert Net)

13 September 2010

MANZINI, 13 September 2010 (IRIN) - Research by South Africa's University of the Witwatersrand and Boston University in the US, has found that starting HIV-positive people on antiretrovirals (ARVs) earlier, and at a higher CD4 count (a measure of immune system strength), may be cheaper than previously thought.

After years of debating the financial feasibility of starting those in need of ARVs at a CD4 count of 350 instead of the current threshold of 200, research has shown that it would only add 13 percent to the cost of South Africa's national ARV programme if improved drug purchasing systems and task-shifting strategies were implemented. [http://www.irinnews.org/pdf/HIVSOC_NACM_presentation.pdf]

Activists and government have duelled for years over whether the country could afford the new treatment guidelines, including better drugs and earlier treatment initiation, in keeping with the World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations. [<http://www.who.int/entity/hiv/pub/arv/advice/en/index.html>]

South Africa issued its first revised HIV treatment guidelines in six years in April 2010. The new guidelines featured less toxic ARVs, but access to treatment at a CD4 count of 350 was only extended to a selected group of high-risk patients, such as pregnant women, infants and tuberculosis patients. [<http://www.plusnews.org/report.aspx?ReportID=88207>]

Starting patients on ARVs at lower CD4 counts has been linked to a greater likelihood of opportunistic infections and poorer patient outcomes, but government argued that it could not afford to extend earlier treatment more broadly. WHO recommends that all HIV-positive patients start treatment at a CD4 count of 350.

The findings were part of a study that estimated the costs of implementing South Africa's current guidelines as well as the full WHO HIV treatment recommendations between 2010 and 2017.

Researchers combined mathematical models with costings and patient data collected from two Johannesburg ARV clinics over several years to estimate treatment need, patients lost to follow up, and treatment costs associated with each set of guidelines.

Under the current guidelines, the government will have spent about US\$9.8 billion on treatment by 2017. Implementing the full WHO recommendations by starting people on treatment earlier would cost about \$11 billion over the same period.

Both price tags include savings of around \$5.6 billion from sourcing drugs at internationally competitive prices and implementing task-shifting strategies, specifically

nurse-initiated and -managed ARV treatment, with ARV dispensing by pharmacy assistants.

Prevalence, not eligibility, drives up patient numbers

Researchers also estimated that by 2017 about 3.5 million people would have started taking ARVs under the current guidelines, but earlier treatment would increase that figure by 400,000 patients.

"The growth in numbers of patients on [ARVs] over time, as a result of prevalence and sheer need, is higher than the growth in the number of patients as a result of increases in eligibility," said researcher and Boston University assistant professor Gesine Meyer-Rath during her recorded presentation of the study at the 2010 International AIDS Conference in Vienna, Austria. [<http://pag.aids2010.org/Session.aspx?s=447>]

"If the South African government keeps doing what it said it would do - that is, put everyone who needs it on treatment - that will already drive the cost of the programme much more than decisions about eligibility, which will only drive costs at the margins," she said.

Data to drive advocacy, shape health systems

While the study found that implementing earlier treatment would cost government about 10 percent of the national health services budget by 2012; the current guidelines would work out to just slightly less at around 8 percent.

Dr Francois Venter, head of the Southern Africa HIV Clinicians Society, discussed the research at the recent annual meeting of the Rural Doctors Association of Southern Africa (RuDASA) and noted that, given the medical expenses averted with treatment, the cost was worth it.

"It seems to me that if 47 percent of your deaths are HIV-related, then 10 percent of our budget isn't a lot to pay," he told IRIN/PlusNews.[www.plusnews.org]

"We [Reproductive Health and HIV Research Unit at Witwatersrand University] have done some evaluations and found that if you put someone on ARVs you stop at least one hospitalization and several clinic visits," he said.

In the context of decreased international aid, cost-saving will become increasingly important, Venter added.

"We need to make resources go further - whether it's rich South Africa or poor Malawi - those countries really need to think about working smarter," Venter he told IRIN/PlusNews. "If you employ a little creativity, some good people, and a little research money, you could go a long way in telling us how to run our health care systems a whole lot better and smarter."

The South African government funds about 80 percent of its national ARV programme, making it an exception in a region where the health budgets of many countries - Mozambique, Madagascar - are heavily supported by international donors. With an HIV prevalence of about 18 percent, South Africa has the world's largest ARV programme: more than a million people on treatment.

Refugees/IDPs & Migration

SOUTH AFRICA: Hollow promise of permits for Zimbabweans

(IRIN)

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Johannesburg, 16 September 2010 (IRIN) - South Africa is to resume the deportation of Zimbabweans on 1 January 2011, on the basis that conditions in their home country have improved sufficiently, while those with valid documents will be issued with permits to stay. This is a welcome promise, activists say, but hard to implement and irrelevant to most expatriates.

In April 2009 South Africa placed a moratorium on deportations, introduced a 90-day visa on demand for Zimbabwean passport holders, and was on the cusp of issuing a special permit allowing them to work and reside in South Africa for up to 3 years, but this has now been reversed.

"After the 31st of December [2010] all undocumented Zimbabweans will be treated like all others and their deportation will resume," a South African Cabinet statement warned in early September. Government spokesperson Themba Maseko told local media the decision was based on the belief that "some form of stability has returned to Zimbabwe."

Doctor Ncube, Vice-President of the Global Zimbabwe Forum, a diaspora organization, maintained that for most expatriates "Zimbabwe is not anywhere near to being safe enough to go home to."

According to the Cabinet statement, "Zimbabwean nationals who are working, conducting business, or studying in South Africa will be issued with a working permit, business permit, or study permit ... provided they have valid Zimbabwean documents."

This was an empty promise, Ncube told IRIN. "It's a good gesture, but those permits are only relevant to a small minority because most Zimbabweans in South Africa illegally cross the border," and do not have the necessary documentation; they also usually work in the informal sector and so would be at risk of deportation.

The Zimbabwean government has said it would provide undocumented nationals in South Africa with the necessary paperwork, but most fear that officials on both sides of the

border lack the resources and capacity to process the huge group before the end of the year.

The Forced Migration Studies Programme (FMSP) at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg has estimated that between 1 million and 1.5 million Zimbabweans were living in South Africa.

"While it is encouraging to see the government expanding avenues for legal immigration - a positive step towards a regional migration system - the programme's successful implementation will require an unprecedented level of administrative capacity and coordination. The explicit reliance on Zimbabwe's frail consular services adds another potential pitfall," the director of FMSP, Loren Landau, told IRIN.

"Given the reluctance of South Africa to grant refugee status to Zimbabwe's victims of persecution, one is left wondering just how many hitherto undocumented migrants will practically qualify for legal status under this initiative."