

'Inclusive dialogue key to resolving Zim crises'

KUDZAI KUWAZA

THERE is need for political dialogue in Zimbabwe as well as ramping up international re-engagement to effectively address the multi-faceted economic and political crises gripping the country, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has said.

The call comes in the wake of concerted efforts by various stakeholders, including the church, to bring President Emmerson Mnangagwa and opposition MDC leader Nelson Chamisa to the negotiating table following the disputed presidential election in 2018, which Mnangagwa won by a wafer-thin but controversial 50,6%.

However, the efforts have hit a brick wall due to the entrenched positions of the two political leaders. Mnangagwa insists Chamisa must recognise him as president before negotiations begin, while Chamisa says the legitimacy of the septuagenarian leader should be one of the issues up for discussion.

In a wide-ranging interview this week, IMF representative to Zimbabwe Patrick Imam said political dialogue is vital for the country to recover from the economic and social doldrums it finds itself in.

"If you look at the history of Zimbabwe, one must conclude that many of the current economic problems were planted decades ago and explain the long-term downward trend in living standards we have observed. Let me remind you that Zimbabwe was a middle-income country with a low level of debt at Independence and, 40 years on, the country has been relegated to the status of a lower-income country with high debt levels," Imam said.

"And most of the reasons for this dismal record are to be found in the politics of the country. Zimbabwe's history has been a very traumatic one for all groups concerned. Whether it's before Independence or since, every group has suffered and been traumatised at one time or another. As a result, the country remains deeply polarised, and efforts at reconciliation have been rather elusive so far.

"I would highlight that this is not in the purview of the IMF, but political dialogue to find common ground will be crucial to overcome the collective trauma and to move forward.



President Emmerson Mnangagwa

Only through the political dialogue can healing take place and society move forward. The work on improving democracy, such as a re-look into Aippa (Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act) and other restrictive laws should therefore also be intensified."

Imam said it was imperative to intensify the process of international re-engagement. Zimbabwe has been isolated by Western countries over human rights concerns and failure to uphold the rule of law.

Mnangagwa's government, however, has started the re-engagement process with the West which has been marred by the sluggish pace of reforms by Harare and the failure to effectively address the killing of citizens by soldiers after protests in August 2018 and January last year. He said the dialogue would be fruitful in future, despite challenges.

"Let me answer this question by providing an analogy with what happened in Northern Ireland. For decades, you had troubles there between the Catholics and the Protestants. There was no trust between the two sides. And negotiations, often secret ones, were regu-

larly attempted, but always ended up collapsing. These failures, however, were key to the eventual success. Whenever the negotiations failed, each side was forced to reflect on why they had reached an impasse and were forced to try to better understand the other side, to see how they tick and to understand the constraint they faced. So failure was part of the learning process and necessary to eventually succeed and achieve peace," Imam pointed out.

"And this analogy similarly applies to the international re-engagement of Zimbabwe. Even if the re-engagement is delayed, and this is certainly not a given as the government is committed to pursue the political and economic reforms, the fact that both sides have interacted on a regular level over the past two years and continue to do so is laying the ground for the eventual success. Both sides understand each other much better now, and so my sincere hope is that through mutual comprehension and gradual confidence building measures, re-engagement will materialise sooner than anticipated."

Misa-Zim challenges BAZ over 'exorbitant' licencing fees

BRIDGET MANANAVIRE

THE Zimbabwe chapter of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (Misa) has, through its lawyers, written to the Broadcasting Authority of Zimbabwe (BAZ) seeking a review of the recently gazetted fees for broadcasting licences for community radio stations.

BAZ, through General Notice 438 of 2020 published in the Government Gazette of February 21 2020 and also published in local newspapers, invited applications for broadcasting licences.

In a letter dispatched by Atherstone and Cook lawyer Chris Mhike, Misa proposed a reduction of the application fee to ZWS2 000 from the current ZWS8 500 and the licence fee to ZWS3 000 from ZWS17 000 per annum.

"The application fees and licence prescribed in the invitation relating to community radio stations are extremely exorbitant, and therefore inhibitive to the ability of many potential broadcasters to exercise their broadcasting-related constitutional rights. We therefore specifically urge you to immediately revise the fees downwards," the letter, dated March 2 2020, read. "The above-proposed monetary levels are proffered on the basis of a regional comparative analysis. Our clients desire to see Zimbabwe's regulatory framework being aligned to regional and international trends."

BAZ has been under intense criticism over its lackadaisical approach to the licencing of community radio stations, with calls from rights organisations calling for an investigation into why the authority had not yet licensed community radio stations since its establishment almost two decades ago.

Misa said the call for applications favoured specific geographical areas, for instance Harare, to the exclusion of numerous other areas in Zimbabwe and excludes communities of interest, for instance, religious communities, cultural groupings or other social communities.

"BAZ, through G.N. (General Notice) 438 of 2020 is limiting the number of community radio station licences to only 10 with no explanation as to why the number has been kept at such a low figure at a time when not a single community radio station had been licensed previously," Mhike wrote.

"This minimalist approach for community radio stations is highly unsatisfactory, especially in the context of the recent enhancement of broadcasting rights for local commercial radio stations. G.N. expands the permissible geographical areas of coverage for commercial broadcasters, a development that is essentially commendable.

"The laudable expansion however highlights the paucity of broadcasting opportunities for community radio stations."

The media freedom advocacy group said it would take the case to court if BAZ fails to respond to the letter within 48 hours, as the matters it is raising are of great concern.

Govt battles fuel scarcity, price distortions

TINASHE KAIRIZA

ENERGY and Power Development minister Fortune Chasi says fuel prices will be reviewed on or before the 5th day of each month to arrest pricing distortions, as well as mitigate shortages of the commodity.

Zimbabwe, reeling under a multi-faceted economic crisis, is currently gripped by an acute shortage of fuel.

The Zimbabwe Energy Regulatory Authority (Zera) has, since November last year, been reviewing fuel prices on a monthly basis, in line with Statutory Instrument 270 of 2019.

In a statement yesterday, Chasi said: "It will be recalled that from November 2019, government moved from weekly pricing of fuel to monthly price reviews (M-1). This shift in pricing is provided for under Statutory Instrument 270 of 2019. Petroleum (Petroleum Products Pricing) Regulations, 2019. In terms of Section 4(2) of the above-stated Statutory Instrument, fuel prices for the succeeding month shall become effective on or before the 5th day of the implementation month.

"Zera adhered to the said Statutory Instrument up to the end of December 2019. Commencing January 2020, prices were announced on 17 January 2020, and in February, the prices for that month were announced on 28 February 2020. Due to the passage of time, international oil prices moved significantly while the Free on Board (FOB) prices used for local pricing lagged behind. The above developments at the international plane resulted in pricing distortions in the local market and consequently unavailability of fuel."

Chasi noted that it was imperative for Zera to



Energy minister Fortune Chasi

conform to the dictates of the legal instrument which compelled the authority to review the price of fuel on a monthly basis.

"Consequently, upon movements in the international oil prices, Zera moved to correct the situation yesterday through a public statement in which it reaffirmed the provisions of the law as contained in the Statutory Instrument. This statement reaffirms that prices for fuel will be announced on or before the 5th day of the implementation month," he said.

Yesterday, Zera announced new fuel prices. To contain the fuel shortage crisis crippling the country, Chasi said government has developed a pricing structure which will be unveiled in due time.

He said non-compliance with the yet to be unveiled licensing regime "will result in decisive action by the relevant authority and this will result in cancellation of licences".

Following recent fuel pricing changes, which saw government allowing entities with free funds to sell the commodity in foreign currency, Chasi expressed concern over unlicensed dealers who were selling fuel in hard currency.

"Government has noted with concern, the proliferation of the sale of fuel in foreign currency in circumstances where that should not be the case.

"Operators engaging in this practice are hereby warned that no other punishment will be meted out for such violations save for the cancellation of licences," Chasi said.

Chasi said government had crafted a range of measures to contain the crippling fuel crisis.

He said: "Government has developed the Direct Fuel Import (DF) Framework as well as Petroleum Licensing Regulations. The two are part of a continuous process of improving functionality and transparency of the fuel sector."

Chasi added that in collaboration with Treasury and the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, his ministry would ensure timeous disbursement of foreign currency allocations to fuel importing firms to curtail shortages.

"This ministry, working in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance and the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe is taking all necessary steps to ensure timeous arrangements for letters of credit (LCs) allocation of foreign currency to ensure that there are no gaps in the supply of fuel," he said.