

Zimbabwe ON THE BRINK

Once a prosperous and peaceful country, Zimbabwe's rapid slide into economic ruin has had a devastating effect on the health system. However there is a glimmer of hope, ADAM COLES and REBECCA HINCHEY write.

A group of children play on a pile of uncollected garbage. Unaware of the danger, the children continue for hours, amusing themselves as small children do. And that is all it takes for their fate to be sealed. An infectious and potentially fatal disease looms amongst the uncollected rubble and broken sewer pipes on which they climb. Soon enough the children will be suffering with the disease cholera, an intestinal parasite caused by bacteria in contaminated water. Not only will the children suffer from the deadly disease, but there is no medical treatment available, even if their parents could afford it.

Zimbabwe has in the last few months suffered more than 91,000 cases of cholera and more than 4000 deaths, one of the worst outbreaks in Africa of this easily preventable disease. But it is just the latest epidemic crippling the African nation. Before cholera there was (and still is) HIV, while Tuberculosis (TB) and malnutrition complete a lethal quartet.

These problems have overwhelmed Zimbabwe's skeleton health infrastructure. Everything needed to treat the sick and dying is in short supply: medicines, surgical gloves, needles, soap, water and electricity. Equipment that tests and treats citizens lies dormant, neglected, broken or out-of-date. Doctors treat diseases like TB based on symptoms alone. The only testing facility in the country no longer functions.

Haphazard access to treatment, and misdiagnosis are feeding an epidemic of drug-resistant strains of TB, and possibly HIV. The effects of malnutrition are exacerbating disease and leaving Zimbabweans too weak to travel the distance to the few health clinics that do exist.

Doctors for Human Rights in Zimbabwe

report that over the last nine years 100,000 health professionals have given up and gone elsewhere. The few doctors and nurses left behind stopped going to work. It was termed a strike but the simple fact was that they couldn't go to work as their wages wouldn't cover the costs of transport. Most public sector hospitals have simply pulled down their blinds and bolted the doors.

Humanitarian organisations that put up their hands to assist were slapped in the face by politicians and bureaucrats more interested in maintaining their lies than helping their people. Four excruciating months after the cholera outbreak began, the government was finally forced to declare a national emergency. Only then could aid workers begin to provide large-scale assistance. Immediately infection and death rates fell. But with the damp heat of summer just around the corner, the World Health Organization fears these numbers could climb again.

Only 10 years ago Zimbabwe had one of the best medical and education programs in Africa. Today the nation is riddled with economic doom, death and disease. It is stricken by poverty, unemployment and starvation. Life expectancy has almost halved in less than 20 years. In 1990 both sexes could expect to live to 62. By 2006 that had fallen to 34 years for males and 37 years for females. Experts agree that it will have deteriorated since then.

Zimbabwe's astonishing problems are interlocked and stem largely from the cruelty and incompetence of the despotic President Robert Mugabe and his ruling ZANU-PF party.

Economic collapse began with the commercial land seizures of 2000, decimating the agricultural sector that employed 70% of the population and accounted for almost half



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of Zimbabwe's exports. Much of this land lies idle in the hands of ZANU PF officials. A small fraction has been distributed to once landless peasants but they lack the knowledge and supplies to make it productive.

Hyperinflation, estimated in November 2008 at an unbelievable 897,000,000,000,000,000,000 percent (89.7 sextillion), has been fueled by a monetary policy that has largely consisted of printing more and more worthless paper currency. These twin policies have also resulted in a staggering unemployment rate of 94 percent and rampant malnutrition.

Food shortages have worsened due to corruption, political violence and in some areas, drought. The World Food Program reported in February that more than 10 percent of the population had nothing to eat the previous day. Villagers with food have been forcibly relocated and their stores destroyed. Corrupt officials have stolen from state-owned agricultural corporations; selling essential seeds and fertilizers on the black market to fund their self-largess. Less than a quarter of

Zimbabweans are eating three meals a day. In March the Red Cross predicted that nine million people, 75 percent of Zimbabwe's population, could need food assistance soon.

Death by starvation is just around the corner for hundreds of thousands of Zimbabwe's citizens.

Piling wretchedness on misery are the problems of water and sanitation. They're intimately linked with the cholera epidemic and are precipitated by the centralizing of the water supplies, another politically motivated decision of Mugabe's regime. No one collects the rubbish; mixed with the raw sewerage flowing from broken pipes, its stench fills the streets of the urban areas. Pipes which once delivered fresh water to townships flow no more, rusted and ruined from neglect and corruption. Pumping equipment has broken down or disappeared. The people are digging shallow wells for water, but it's sullied and dangerous.

The 13th of February brought a small glimmer of hope with the formation of the unity government, a pairing of old foes, MDC, the Movement for Democratic

Change, lead by Morgan Tsvangirai and ZANU PF, the party of Robert Mugabe.

To say that rebuilding Zimbabwe is a Herculean task is an understatement. There's no money and international donors are reluctant to hand over development aid until there's evidence of genuine power-sharing and economic and political reform.

Almost everything that makes a civilized and functioning nation needs rebuilding: sanitation, agriculture, the health and education systems, government, banking, and a stable currency. And that's not to mention trust and psychological healing.

There are some small but promising signs. Public servants, including teachers and health professionals, now command a real if pitiful wage of US \$100 per month. It has helped to get money flowing again. Some food prices have dropped. Ten kilos of maize cost \$10 in February, by March it was \$5. Schools and health services are slowly re-opening.

Can this basket case return to its former bread-basket glory? Only time will tell. ■