Media Watch on the Constitution – Environment

Tokwe-Mukorsi disaster exposes govt’s lack of preparedness

February 1 – February 28, 2014

This Media Watch on the Constitution is a monthly report that assesses the media’s coverage of the government’s performance with regard to its obligation to adhere to the terms of the new Constitution and with particular emphasis on the Bill of Rights. The objective is to establish whether the media is providing sufficient and accurate information about government’s role in promoting and protecting fundamental human rights, such as food security and education, health care and shelter; as well as other socio-economic and political rights.
Tokwe-Mukorski flooding exposes gov’t’s lack of preparedness

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 Background to Study

The new Constitution of Zimbabwe obliges the State to take reasonable legislative and other measures, within limits of the resources available to it to promote and protect environmental rights.

This is enshrined under Chapter Four (Declaration of Rights) of the Charter.

Section 73 of this Chapter stipulates that every person has the right “to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being” and “to have an environment protected for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures”.

Such measures should among others, “prevent pollution and ecological degradation”, “promote conservation”, and “secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources, while promoting economic and social development”.

1.2 Justification of Study

THIS study is significant because the promotion of a safe, sustainable and satisfactory environment is a fundamental human right that is not only protected under the provisions of the new Constitution, but also by the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations’ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; UN Millennium Development Goals; and other international instruments to which Zimbabwe is a signatory.

The ZANU PF government acknowledged the importance of protecting and promoting Zimbabweans’ environmental rights by including the agenda in its new five-year policy called ZimAsset.

The policy, which was launched in October last year, acknowledged that “Despite Zimbabwe being endowed with abundant natural resources, the country continues to face multiple environmental management challenges that include pollution, poor waste management, deforestation and land degradation, veldt fires, poaching and
biodiversity loss”. Furthermore, ZimAsset observes that the country “is susceptible to perennial floods and droughts caused by climatic changes emanating from global warming. The climatic changes affect the country’s agro-based economy whose livelihoods largely depend on rain fed agriculture and livestock production”.

To achieve this agenda, the government promised to create two clusters, one on “environmental management” and the other “protection and conversation”, whose outcomes are “improved natural resources management”, “increased ecosystem representation in the parks estate”, and “improved park protection”.

The two clusters would use a number of strategies to achieve environmental rights. Among them are to: “continue advocacy and awareness campaigns; enact legislation to effectively manage the environment; Formulate national climatic change policy” and “capacitate National Parks and Wild Life to combat poaching; institute methods of increasing wildlife species, flora and fauna; update reports of the ecosystem and its preservation”.

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**CHAPTER TWO**

**Summary of Findings**

THE media carried 129 stories on Tokwe-Mukorsi flooding during the period under review.

Of these, 65 were contained in the government controlled State private media. The remaining 64 were contained in the private media.

- One hundred (78%) of the 129 reports were on the Tokwe-Mukorsi flooding.
- The remaining 29 were on other environmental issues, including accusations that some private companies and local government authorities were behind environmental degradation in Zimbabwe.
- Eighteen of the 100 reports on the Tokwe-Mukorsi floods were on the causes of the disaster.

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Twenty-eight were on the effects of the floods on in the Tokwe-Mukorski area and at the camps were the victims were relocated.

Twenty-four were on appeals for technical, operational and financial support. These included joint efforts by the government, donors and the private sector to assist the victims.

The remaining thirty were on general reports about the floods.

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TOKWE-MUKOSI FLOODING

Govt criticized for lack of preparedness

The flooding of the Tokwe-Mukorski river basin, following the partial collapse of the Towe-Mukorsi Dam wall, due to heavy rains, triggered a humanitarian crisis in the area.

News of the flooding, which began on February 4, attracted significant media attention in the month under review and exposed government’s lack of disaster preparedness.

The flooding reportedly killed two people and left approximately 20 000 people living upstream the Tokwe-Mukoski Dam area at high risk, while another 40 000 downstream were said to be at moderate risk of flooding, forcing President Mugabe to declare the area a state of national disaster (Radio VoP, The Herald and The Standard, 17 & 23/2).

According to the Zimbabwe Independent (21/2), disaster preparedness, includes among others, the readiness and ability of society to forecast and take precautionary measures in advance of an imminent threat and response to cope with a disaster by organizing and delivering timely and effective rescue, relief and other appropriate post-disaster assistance.

It also includes activities and measures taken in advance to ensure effective response to the impact of disaster, or conscious effort to predict, respond and cope with the effects of a potential disaster (Independent, 21/2).

In addition, preparedness requires development of early warning mechanisms, plans for evacuation, the education and training of officials and people at risk, the establishment of policies, standards and organizational arrangements (Independent, 21/2).

All media, except ZTV, criticized the manner in which government and the Civil Protection Unit (CPU) handled the Tokwe-Mukorski disaster, arguing that it exposed how unprepared Zimbabwe was to deal with disasters and emergencies.

ZTV’s mostly reported the disaster, which required an evacuation of over 2,500 families, from the perspective of the government and ZANU PF.
Consequently, the broadcaster did not highlight the extent of the disaster, especially the human suffering. Even worse, ZTV presented the authorities as on top of the situation despite palpable evidence on the ground.

Moreover, ZTV, alongside Star FM, reduced most of their coverage of the flooding to event reporting. Their stories were largely based on announcements, Press statements and pledges by the authorities, or visits by the officials to Tokwe-Mukorsi and Chigwizi, where some victims were evacuated to (ZTV, 9, 14, 16, 18, 19, 26/2, 8pm and Star FM, 19 & 28/2).

This possibly limited these media’s ability to investigate the extent of the disaster and shortcomings of the authorities' intervention.

But the rest of the media criticized the authorities for lack of preparedness, especially considering the fact that there were early warnings of the possibility of flooding due to heavy rains that lashed most parts of the country between January and February.

The Herald’s columnist Jeffrey Gogo (17/2), for instance, expressed concern over comments by the Civil Protection Unit director, Madzudzo Pawadyira, when asked by ZBC reporter, Luckmore Safuli, about what the CPU was doing to assist Tokwe-Mukorsi flood victims. Pawadyira is reported to have said, “He was at the family farm” and, therefore, could not immediately provide details on what his department CPU was doing (ZTV, 9/2, 8pm).

Gogo condemned Pawadyira’s statements as “clearly reckless, arrogant and insensitive” and unbecoming of a man of his stature. According to Gogo, it was “incredible” that Pawadyira “spoke from the comfort of the family farm” at a time thousands of families had lost their homes, livelihoods and valuables, and children sleeping in the cold, hungry”.

Gogo argued, “A more sensitive CPU director would have been on the ground with the affected people, designing suitable responses from an informed position”.

Later Pawadyira was reported saying inadequate funding was severely hampering the CPU’s efforts to deliver on its mandate (ZBC, 9/2, 8pm and Independent, 21/2).

“In 2013 and 2014, CPU was allocated a mere US$450 000 when they needed US$5 million to deal with natural disasters”, Pawadyira said, adding that: “Our preparedness is compromised by lack of funding, but what we did was to go out to all flood-prone areas before the rains came to encourage people to look at the topography of their area to see if it was likely to be hit by floods”.

Most media reported government as struggling to abate the humanitarian crisis caused by the floods.

For instance, from the US$20 million required to evacuate thousands of families from Tokwe-Mukorsi Dam, the cash-strapped government was only able to release a meager US$75,000, leaving the international community with the daunting task of raising the rest.

The authorities had also only managed to relocate 781 (31%) of over 2,514 families that were affected by the floods over the month (The Herald, 6/3).
It was against this background that Zi FM (11/2) recorded villagers in the Tokwe-Mukorsi expressing their unhappiness “with the slow pace at which the government is conducting the evacuation exercise”.

Earlier, NewsDay (10/2) reported that “hordes of families that were forcibly evacuated” from the Tokwe-Mukorsi Dam’s flood basin without any compensation “have been staying in the open along the Masvingo-Beitbridge highway”.

Under the headline: Tokwe-Mukorsi villagers ‘dumped’ by roadside, the reported that the villagers, who were temporarily left at Muzvidziwa bus stop in Ward 36 with their few belongings, were living in danger of disease outbreak, as there were no sanitary facilities in the area.

Although NewsDay did not provide the circumstances in which these villagers were “dumped” here, it appeared as if they were part of government’s efforts to relocate flood victims to Nuanesti Ranch in Mwenezi.

Most of the media reported the conditions at Masangula and Chigwizi areas in Nuanesti where the villagers were resettled as deplorable.

They reported acute shortages of clean water, food, clinics, toilets and tents. Other problems included over crowdedness and lack of privacy, amid reports that families of say seven people, comprising children, parents and grand-parents, slept in one roomed tents, and news of about 1,000 school children dropping out of school (The Standard & Action Aid, 16 & 24/2 and Daily News On Sunday & The Herald, 2 & 4/3).

But ZBC painted a different picture. It mostly reported senior ZANU PF and government officials indicating that the situation was under control.

In one such case, ZTV (16/2, 8pm) reported ZANU PF’s Masvingo province chairman, Kalisto Gwanetsa, claiming that “the revolutionary party” had made “significant strides towards assisting the victims of the Tokwe-Mukorsi floods by engaging various stakeholders and the government to chip in with essential needs such as water, shelter and food”.

Gwanetsa spoke to ZBC News during an assessment tour of Chingwizi holding camp by the ZANU PF provincial executive.

Speaking at the same occasion, ZANU PF Politburo member, who is also Masvingo senator, Dzikamai Mavhaire said he was satisfied with the work on the ground and called for more well-wishers to assist some of the families that are yet to be transported from Tokwe-Mukorsi to Chingwizi.

Apart from the Tokwe-Mukorsi area, the media reported other parts of the country as also having been hit by floods and in serious need of assistance. These included Tsholotsho, where one person died, while several others were injured by the heavy rains; Muzarabani, Gutu, Chiredzi, Mwenezi, Mberengwa, Gwanda and Binga (ZBC, 5 & 19/2, 8pm and Studio 7, Daily News, The Herald and The Standard, 4, 5, 6, 17 & 23/2).
OTHER ENVIRONMENT ISSUES

Companies, councils causing environmental degradation

ALTHOUGH the Tokwe-Mukorsi flooding was the highlight of the media’s coverage of environmental issues, the media also carried a number of stories on other environmental matters.

Of particular concern were reports showing that private companies and local authorities were the major culprits in environmental degradation.

Chief among them were Chinese and Russian mining firms and the Harare City Council.

In one such case, Daily News (5/2) reported Environment, Water and Climate Minister Saviour Kasukuwere as having “blasted” Mutare-based gold miner DTZ-OZGEO for causing environmental degradation in its mining activities along Mutare River.

Speaking at a World Wetland Day commemoration in Domborutinhira on February 3, Kasukuwere reportedly expressed shock at the state of the river in the Penhalonga area, owing to the company’s activities, which has forced the river off its natural course, apart from the three dams that have been created (Daily News, 5/2).

According to the Daily News, DTZ-OZGEO, which is jointly owned by Development Trust of Zimbabwe and Russian company, OZGEO, extracts gold along Mutare River but has not been operating since last October when the ministries of Mines and Mining Development and Environment, Water and Climate jointly directed, through the Environmental Management Agency (EMA), mining firms “to cease operations along rivers following massive environmental degradation along Mazoe River”.

In another, ZTV (24/2, 8pm) and NewsDay (25/2) reported that EMA required at least $112 million to rehabilitate the environment surrounding over 20 decommissioned mines dotted around the country.

Speaking before the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Environment, Tourism, Water and Hospitality Industry, EMA’s director-general, Mutsa Chasi, said “there was massive land degradation and pollution by miners, industry and people in general, adding that many project developers did not rehabilitate the land after completing projects” (ZTV, 24/2, 8pm and NewsDay, 25/2).

According to ZTV (24/2, 8pm) and NewsDay, Chasi also disclosed before the committee that Chisumbanje Ethanol Plant had also failed to hand in its Environmental Impact Assessment documents and despite several fines and warnings, the company had ignored the requirement.

In addition, Chasi reportedly urged the committee to lobby for amendment of environment legislation to ensure there were mandatory sentences
accompanied by hefty fines, as the current fines of $400 for repeated offences “were too lenient” (ZTV, 24/2, 8pm and NewsDay, 25/2).

Chasi told the committee that alluvial mining had destroyed rivers such as Mazowe and others resulting in sludge discharge, blocking and damaging of river flow and there was a lot of mercury and cyanide use to the extent that these were poisoning communities, animals, plants and birds (ZTV, 24/2, 8pm and NewsDay, 25/2).

Other serious environmental breaches that the EMA boss said were happening in the country included dumping of chemicals by companies, hospitals failing to incinerate their waste, people dumping baby diapers, failure to rehabilitate broken down sewers, dumping of blood and animal waste by abattoirs, building on wetlands, and cutting down of trees (NewsDay, 25/2).

Reports about companies and local authorities being accused of environmental degradation constituted eight (28%) of the 29 reports on other environmental issues.

The remaining 21 were on general issues relating to the environment.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

MMPZ urges the media to pursue their efforts to assist the authorities to develop sustainable solutions to promote Zimbabwe’s right to a safe and sustainable environment, in line with the provisions of the country’s Constitution.

Additionally, our media should:

- Investigate the reasons behind the floods that wrecked havoc across the country, in particular Tokwe-Mukorsi area.
- Investigate the exact circumstances behind the partial collapse of the Tokwe-Mukorsi Dam wall.
- Give a comprehensive picture of the impact of the floods, especially the human suffering.
- Avoid exaggerating the crisis or playing down government’s limited ability to deal with this critical issue of protecting the flood victims and providing them with food, shelter and other basic amenities.
- Identify and assess the adequacy of measures by government, local authorities, relief agencies and other stakeholders, to mitigate the disaster.
- Remind the nation and the government that the protection of all citizens from natural disasters and the promotion of their right to a safe and sustainable environment are fundamental human rights, which are guaranteed by the Constitution.
- Remind government of the urgent need to align laws that deal with the
environment and protection of the public from natural disasters with the provisions of the new Constitution so that Zimbabweans can fully enjoy their rights to a safe and sustainable environment.