

## **A catastrophe in slow motion**

### **Covid-19 hits Zimbabwe**

When does a crisis become a catastrophe ? And how do you measure the scale of a catastrophe ?

The Coronavirus arrived late in Zimbabwe compared to many other countries and that might have given the government more time to prepare for the onslaught, alert the people to the dangers and assemble the resources needed to combat it. Tragically when Covid-19 arrived in Zimbabwe - and in dramatic fashion as it transpired, with the first reported fatality on March 23 - it found both the government and people almost totally unprepared.

The lack of any effective preparation was vividly demonstrated by the drama surrounding that first Covid-19-related death. The unfortunate victim, one Zororo Makamba, was a 30 year old radio and television commentator, the scion of one of Zimbabwe's wealthiest families and very well connected to the ruling ZANU PF elite. Yet neither the fame of this young and rising star nor his access to political power and privilege were enough to save him within, and from, a health system that was woefully unprepared for the crisis.

Returning from 20 days in New York with a fever, Zororo consulted a doctor for advice. The GP who was aware that he had some underlying medical issues recommended that he be admitted to hospital and tested for Covid-19 immediately. Tragically there followed a catalogue of errors, omissions and sheer incompetence on the part of the government's health service which led to this young man dying a few days later, a lonely and wretched death in the Wilkins Infectious Diseases Hospital in Harare.

There was a delay in getting the results of a virus test and further delay in having the patient admitted to the hospital which, it soon emerged, had no available ventilator nor the medication that would be required, nor even a sufficient supply of oxygen. As his health deteriorated his increasingly desperate family drew on all the resources and political connections available to them to save his life. They supplied a portable ventilator to the hospital only to be told there was no suitable electrical socket in the room to operate it from. They informed the hospital staff who were not monitoring his condition closely that Zororo was in distress and that his oxygen had run out. They even requested he be moved to a private health facility which was ready to admit him. Finally they made a personal plea to the Minister of Health and then to both President Mnangagwa and his wife, requesting their intervention. The promised help never materialized. The family's best efforts were to no avail.

In an angry statement issued after his death a spokesman for the family said, "At the end before he died he kept telling us that he was alone and scared and the staff was refusing to help him to a point where he got up and tried to walk out and they were trying to restrain him."

The statement ends: "So people need to know that the government is ill prepared, it is not ready to deal with this virus."

A few days later the first reported Covid-19 fatality occurred in Bulawayo. The facts of that case reveal a similar level of unpreparedness and incompetence. A 79 year old resident consulted his GP on March 23 complaining of a sore throat, a cough and a temperature. The doctor prescribed an antibiotic and sent him home with no further instructions. On April 2, now having difficulty in breathing, he was taken to a local hospital. He was diagnosed with pneumonia and admitted on intravenous antibiotics, without any screening from hospital staff or patients. Up to this point he had

not been tested for Covid-19. As his condition worsened, finally, he was tested for the virus and transferred to an Intensive Care Unit. The patient died on April 4. Three days later, on April 7, the test results came back positive.

The most recent update issued by the Ministry of Health on April 8, gives the total number of confirmed Covid-19 cases across the country as 11, including 3 deaths.

On March 30 the government ordered a nationwide lockdown. The country's borders have been closed to all non-essential travel and public gatherings limited to no more than 50 people.

Slowly the nation is adjusting to the shocking reality of Covid-19. But there are two concerns particular to Zimbabwe that have a bearing on how this nation will fare in the fateful weeks ahead.

First, is the condition of its health service and its front-line health workers. After two decades of economic misrule basic infrastructures are failing and the health service itself is in intensive care. Hospital doctors have been in dispute with the government over many months and at one point went on strike to secure a living wage. That dispute remains unresolved. Nurses in state hospitals walked off their jobs in March because they lacked protective equipment. On Sunday April 5 the Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights applied to the High Court for an order compelling the government to beef up Covid-19 protection for public hospitals and healthcare workers. Their lawyers say there are "dire shortages" of ventilators, oxygen tanks, biohazard suits and face masks. So the state hospitals cannot be considered functional even under "normal" conditions, let alone in a pandemic, and the crucial healthcare workers who will be in the front line feel unsupported, even abandoned, by their own government.

Then there is the general health and wellbeing of the people, including their access to food and, crucially, clean drinking water. Here we start with the grim reality (admitted by the government) that 7 million Zimbabweans are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Nutritional needs are high with over 1.1 million children and women requiring nutrition assistance, and some 95,000 children under age 5 acutely malnourished and requiring immediate life-saving nutrition treatment.

Water, sanitation and hygiene present huge challenges. Again, on the government's own admission, over 6.5 million people are affected by these challenges, with 3.6 million in need of urgent assistance. In the greater metropolitan area of Harare alone over 2 million people have no household access to safe drinking water or adequate waste and wastewater disposal services. It is reported that thousands of women and school-age children spend up to eight or nine hours, often queueing through the night, at crowded boreholes to get water - that may or may not be safe.

What hope is there under these conditions for Zimbabweans to practise social distancing and to regularly wash their hands to prevent infection ?

Then finally there is the fear factor. Living under a corrupt authoritarian regime with a track record for gross incompetence is scary enough at the best of times. When a pandemic strikes and a deadly peril is facing the nation, it is terrifying.

The fear increases with the lack of reliable information. I have spoken to a number of Zimbabweans in recent days and they all report a dearth of information on the progress of the virus across the country or of any measures put in place to contain it. The government-controlled media is notoriously partisan and goes to extraordinary lengths to protect its paymasters from criticism. In short it has become little more than a megaphone for ZANU PF politicians, and so hardly a source to go to for reliable information. How then are Zimbabweans to access the information they must have in order to make wise decisions on what to do to keep themselves safe? Social media is now the

main source of information for most Zimbabweans and the accuracy of that information cannot be guaranteed. Which leaves the people with scant reliable information. In such an environment rumours and gossip are bound to increase, along with darker fears for the nation.

In short Covid-19 is shaping up as a full-blown catastrophe for the people of Zimbabwe – a catastrophe that might have been mitigated at least if not avoided by proper preparation and enlightened government. A tragedy unfolding in slow motion. Pray God the beleaguered nation will be spared this further trauma but right now, and apart from divine intervention, this is the direction it is headed.

***Graham Shaw***

17.4,2020

**PS**

For the benefit of our Zimbabwe Victims' Support Fund supporters I must add a brief word about what our gallant partners on the ground are doing to help some of the most vulnerable in the face of the pandemic.

In the first week of April they took delivery of 26 tonnes of mealie meal and this will be allocated to those in greatest need and distributed as our team are able over the next few days. The lockdown will certainly make that process problematic, adding to the difficulties already experienced following the breakdown of Pastor Albert's vehicle. (We understand it is now beyond repair – and more on this anon). However we have no doubt that under Pastor Albert's able direction and oversight the relief food will be brought to those who depend on it. Moreover I am delighted to add that the team managed to purchase 620 tablets of soap, to be distributed along with the mealie meal and as a small but important measure to protect the vulnerable from Covid-19 infection.

Pastor Albert has been forced to cancel most acts of public worship and other church gatherings, using his mobile now as a means to communicate a word of encouragement and hope, along with pastoral support, to his scattered flock. He tells me he is also making the most of the extra time available for quiet prayer and waiting on God, rising as ever before dawn for that purpose.

Thank you, dear friends, for your persevering prayers and faithful support.