

Bulawayo Faces Water Crisis

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Government refuses to intervene to tackle acute shortages in opposition city. The government is refusing to tackle increasing water shortages and instances of waterborne diseases in Bulawayo because of a struggle over control of the city's water supply.

Unless local officials hand over control of the water supply to a government agency, the central authorities have said they will not help residents in Zimbabwe's second largest city where waterborne diseases are on the increase and most of the water supply has now dried up.

Resistance to a takeover by the government agency is fuelled by reports that it has failed to tackle the water crisis in Harare and other cities.

Water shortages and contaminated water supplies are the latest in a long line of daily hardships to face people all over the country.

In Harare, residents of the poorer suburbs of Mabvuku, Tafara and Glen View sometimes go without tap water for up to four weeks at a time. Even the wealthy are beginning to suffer, with the water supply in the upmarket suburb of Glen Lorne drying up two weeks ago.

Water shortages in Harare have led to doctors treating 900 cases of diarrhoea a day, according to a report by the state-run Herald newspaper on August 20.

"We have a persistent problem and have decided to continue treating all diarrhoea-related cases free of charge," said Harare health director Prosper Chonzi, in the report.

Even where there is access to water, it is often unfit for human consumption.

The Bulawayo authorities have resorted to stringent water rationing, allowing residents to access water for only a few hours every three days.

In Harare, Gweru and Mutare, the government agency the Zimbabwe National Water Authority, ZINWA, took control of the supply and distribution of water, after President Robert Mugabe's regime fired popularly elected opposition mayors and councillors and appointed its own favoured commissioners.

But Bulawayo city council has resisted a ZINWA takeover bid.

Situated in the heart of Matabeleland 450 kilometres west of Harare, Bulawayo has always been an opposition city, voting against the ruling Zanu-PF in every election since independence in 1980.

The city has for years battled with water shortages, due to drought and a rapidly increasing population.

The ambitious and expensive Matabeleland Zambezi Water Project - which plans to pipe water from the Zambezi river 450 km away to Matabeleland - has remained a pipe dream for political reasons.

Even if there was the political will to see it through, the recession-hit government lacks the resources.

Bulawayo is now facing its worst water crisis ever - which is compounded by the fact that the government refuses to help unless the city allows a government agency to take control of the supply and distribution of water.

The city's mayor Japhet Ndabeni-Ncube last week accused the government of trying to destroy the city.

Without water, people are unable to wash their hands or flush their toilets, increasing the risk of disease outbreaks. Most people answer nature's call in the bush or open public spaces at night.

While the effects of the water crisis may be similar in Bulawayo and Harare, analysts say the causes are different.

Water shortages in Bulawayo are exacerbated by drought and the standoff over control of supplies, whereas those in Harare are the result of gross mismanagement, inefficiency and lack of planning, as the city's population continues to expand rapidly.

"Harare is very different from Bulawayo," said a Harare council employee who requested anonymity.

"Our water problems here are man-made. The shortages are mainly a result of old pipes which keep bursting. A lot of expensively treated water is wasted through leakages."

He said any deaths which occur as a result of water-related illnesses could be blamed on poor management of the city's affairs.

Since ZINWA took over water management in the capital nearly a year ago, supplies have worsened. This has fuelled resistance by Bulawayo residents who say they have no faith in ZINWA given its record in Harare and other cities.

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