

PR Bid Can't Conceal Grim Realities

Author: [Meshack Ndodana](#)

Officials claim arts festival has bolstered Zimbabwe's image, but dire state of the country is hard to disguise.

A country misrepresented by the media or sliding towards disaster?

Contradictory interpretations on the state of Zimbabwe have abounded in recent weeks, in the wake of several events: the most recent, the Harare International Festival of the Arts, Hifa, was seen as a roaring success, while the Zimbabwe International Trade Fair, ZITF, that preceded it and the Workers' Day celebrations on May 1 were damp squibs.

Hifa executive director Maria Wilson said more than 56,000 tickets had been sold by the last day of the festival, which ended May 6, and about 150 international artists had performed in what she said was the biggest festival ever.

In contrast, the trade fair, which has been running for 48 years, flopped again, having been shunned by international exhibitors. Workers' Day celebrations were a non-event with most workers failing to turn out for the festivities scheduled in all major centres.

At the same time, World Press Freedom Day on May 3 saw the banning of another journalist because he allegedly did not have a license from the Media and Information Commission, MIC, a child of the dreaded Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

But what exactly is Hifa? Is it an oasis of hope in hell or the new face of ZANU-PF public relations? The answer apparently comes from Wilson herself.

She said in an interview with the official Herald newspaper that the festival had succeeded in fulfilling its objective of fighting the stereotype of Africa as a dark continent.

"Much of what we hear about Africa is war, disease and poverty. Yet there is unbelievable courage in the people that is never spoken about," she said.

"I believe as Hifa we have done and shown what we set out to prove - that the Zimbabwean people have not been getting the right coverage."

Commenting on Wilson's remarks, a veteran journalist, now retired, said, "Now I understand why Hifa is the only gathering that does not have to seek police permission. That right is even denied the churches."

He was referring to the prayer meeting planned for March 11, which saw the police descend on attendees and brutally assault them.

The journalist said he was also surprised that during the six-day Hifa festival, Harare was awash with foreign journalists all properly accredited by the MIC.

“All internet cafes in major hotels were full of journalists filing stories to their newspapers around the world and the MIC was conveniently quiet about it,” he said.

On the day Hifa began, workers gathered in all major centres to celebrate Workers’ Day. Their main aim was to raise awareness around the plight of workers - who earn between 300,000 Zimbabwe dollars (20 US dollars) and 600,000 Zimbabwe dollars per month - and demand a living wage for them.

The government ignored them. Minister of Labour and Social Welfare Nicholas Goche, who had been invited to address the main gathering in Harare, snubbed it. Lovemore Matombo, the president of the main labour body, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, ZCTU, announced at the gathering that his union would in the next three months rally workers on the streets if employers and government failed to increase their wages.

“While foreign journalists were touting the success of Hifa they failed to see the penury the ordinary Zimbabwean is living in,” said the veteran journalist. “The elitist Hifa hid from visitors the fact that 80 per cent of our people are living on less than one US dollar a day and that their government does not care a hoot about it.”

On May 3, while the hype around the arts festival was reaching a crescendo, journalists in Zimbabwe were being barred from celebrating World Press Freedom Day and the MIC was in the process of banning independent journalist Nunurai Jena for a year for “being caught practising with an expired licence”.

Under the draconian Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act, journalists must obtain licences from the media commission or face two years in jail if caught practising without them. The commission has forced the closure of four newspapers in the past four years and left scores of journalists without jobs. In its recent World Press Freedom Review, the International Press Institute said although Zimbabwe was not the most dangerous country for journalists to work in, it was probably the most difficult.

In contrast, there were no accredited foreign journalists at the 2007 trade fair, ZITF, which ran from April 24 - 28, ostensibly because there was no desire on the part of the government to advertise how much lustre the country has lost as a regional manufacturing giant.

The international trade fair, for more than 40 years the pride of all Zimbabweans, has been reduced to a pale shadow of itself and can no longer be used to promote the country. In the past, heads of state fell over each other to officially open the trade showcase but now they no longer wish to be associated with it. President Robert Mugabe officially opened this year’s exhibition himself.

Absent from exhibitor stands were machinery, locally assembled vehicles, information technology products, furniture, clothing and farming equipment. Replacing these quality products, which were the cornerstone of the success of the annual exhibition over the past four decades, were low-quality handmade clothes, leather products, traditional medicines and goods from small-to-medium-sized enterprises, SMEs.

SMEs were the most visible category of exhibitors at the fair, with many displaying similar product ranges. Government and some business organisations such as the Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce and the country’s trade promotion body, ZimTrade, were marketing SMEs as Zimbabwe’s counter to western

sanctions.

But, the irony is that despite their sanctions-busting role, SMEs are still forced to rely on imported raw materials. Entrepreneurs say they have no option because of factory closures triggered by foreign currency shortages, as well as power and water cuts.

According to figures announced by Industry and International Trade Minister Obert Mpofu at the end of the fair, 733 of the 815 exhibitors were local. The remaining exhibitors were drawn from 12 countries, mainly from southern Africa. South Africa, Zimbabwe's biggest trade partner, was conspicuous by its absence. Last year, the fair attracted 713 exhibitors.

Industry and International Trade and Zimbabwe International Trade Fair Company officials were at great pains to play up the increase in exhibitors. But commentators compared this year's fair to a flea market.

In 1995, the trade fair attracted 1,200 exhibitors. Of these, 500 were foreign exhibitors from 37 countries. That year, 65 South African companies took up an entire exhibition hall.

The few foreign exhibitors at ZITF 2007 were somewhat reserved as to whether it had been worth their while to come to Zimbabwe. In contrast, foreign artists enthused that they could not wait to come back to Harare for next year's Hifa event, a great ZANU-PF public relations coup.

Meshack Ndodana is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe.

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