

## **Water in Short Supply Despite Rain**

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Bulawayo authorities' standoff with Harare over utilities takeover aggravates shortage of mains water. A young woman stoops by the roadside in one of Bulawayo's poor, high density townships where a huge water-filled crater extends into the road.

The sight of this woman scooping water into a pail highlights the plight of many in this city of more two million, where mains water cuts have continued this year despite the heavy rains that have been pounding Zimbabwe since last year.

"I use the water for ablution purposes," she said after another round of heavy rains hit Bulawayo recently.

While motorists curse the coming of the rain because of the deep potholes it leaves in its wake, the craters have become a lifeline, of sorts, for others.

Bulawayo is facing its worst water crisis in years, and the city authorities say they are not about to lift the stringent system of water rationing, even though heavy rains are now filling up the reservoirs which supply the city.

At the council-run boreholes, long queues have become the order of the day and tempers flare. Recently a man was struck on the head with a beer bottle as residents fought over who should get water first.

While families have resorted to using rainwater from standing pools, it is too dirty to be used for drinking or cooking.

Officials say the shortages are caused not by the lack of water as such, but by the lack of foreign currency needed to purchase purification chemicals.

The shortage of potable water in Bulawayo is closely connected with a standoff between the city authorities and the Zimbabwe National Water Authority, ZINWA.

ZINWA is a recently-formed agency which is supposed to be taking from municipal authorities as the supplier of water to all urban centres in Zimbabwe. However, its performance to date has been heavily criticised, and Bulawayo City Council - controlled by the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC - has resisted the takeover. The government in Harare has made it clear that as long as the takeover is resisted, the local authority will not get any assistance from the centre.

"This is unprecedented," a councillor told IWPR, speaking on condition of anonymity. "The council is now begging for money from companies so it can purchase water purification chemicals. This is a local authority and rightly should get a government grant to deal with such issues."

Council officials say it is government departments based in the city that are the major defaulters, having run up trillions of Zimbabwean dollars – or millions of US dollars – in unpaid water bills.

The city is also under pressure from the National Incomes and Pricing Commission to keep water charges low, as part of the price-fixing policy the government imposed to combat inflation last summer. The authorities in Bulawayo say the resulting low revenue levels have also affected their ability to treat and deliver water.

Further highlighting the extent of the city's water woes, Bulawayo council clinics are now asking expectant mothers to bring their own water with them when they come in to give birth.

“What has compounded the matter for the pregnant women is that they now spend days detained at the clinics as they cannot be released to return home without fully paying the clinic bills,” said a nurse in one of the council clinics situated in one densely populated working class suburb.

Hospitals and clinics in Zimbabwe have resorted to detaining patients who have not paid their bills, as a way of trying to recoup their costs. But the longer the patients spend at clinics with no running water, the more they expose themselves to infection, which can lead to an even longer stay in hospital, the nurse added.

A city council spokesman said he was not aware that women were being asked to bring their own water.

The lack of water has only compounded the power cuts that have caused chaos at the city's health institutions. There are reports that the outages have proved fatal for patients at the city's largest state-run hospital after life-support machines have ground to a halt.

Zimbabwe imports electricity from countries like the South Africa, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and owes substantial sums in back-payments to these countries.

In January, ZESA started supplying electricity to Namibia, aggravating the power shortage on the national grid. It might seem strange that an export contract should take precedence over domestic need, but the authorities point out that the Namibians are investing large sums of money in refurbishing Zimbabwe's Hwange coal-fired power station, and the country badly needs this foreign currency injection.

As the energy crisis deepens, both ZINWA and ZESA have refused to accept responsibility.

In other cities where ZINWA has taken over mains water and sewerage, it blames the shortage of electricity for its failure to maintain the waterworks. For its part, ZESA says it has its own problems, including vandals damaging substations.

Wherever the blame lies, Bulawayo's residents are experiencing deprivations that many say are the worst they can remember. It is something of a vicious circle – with no electricity or fuel, many opt to cook meals outside on open fires. But with the downpours continuing, it is often impossible to light a fire.

As one resident told IWPR, “We cannot afford paraffin that would enable us to prepare meals, so for us the power blackouts mean long hours without eating anything as we do nothing but wait for the rain to stop.”

Joseph Nhlanhla is the pseudonym of an IWPR reporter in Bulawayo.

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