

## **Zimbabwean Radio Journalists to Face Trial** <sup>[1]</sup>

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The silencing of the country's last independent radio station.

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Relatives and friends advised me to go into hiding immediately for they knew the kind of story that was inevitably about to unfold - detention and torture at the hands of the police. I would be detained together with other board members and station managers, even though the charges would be pathetically insufficient to warrant it.

Zimbabwean police are known to torture detainees with beatings and through the sheer humiliation of being locked up in the country's prisons, which are among the filthiest in the world. Cells are notorious for being overcrowded and lice-infested. The food, if available, is barely fit for human consumption.

It was a few days to the Christmas and New Year holidays, so the possibility was high that I would be thrown into prison throughout the festive period and held with common criminals. Zimbabwean police like to make a prisoner's humiliation total.

Court officials are unavailable during holidays, so detainees cannot be brought to trial in the 48 hours stipulated by our increasingly fragile and often ignored laws.

The "crime" for which I was sought was being a leading journalist and board member in one of Zimbabwe's last independent news outlets, VOP.

In fact, independent broadcasting had become so impossible in our own country that we had been reduced to beaming our taped reports, made inside the country, via a Radio Netherlands shortwave transmitter on the Indian Ocean island of Madagascar back into Zimbabwe.

The ruling ZANU PF government was upset that villagers could pick up our signals more clearly than those of state radio and television, which broadcast a steady stream of ruling party propaganda.

I heeded my friends' and relatives' advice and went into hiding immediately. I threw a few clothes and personal belongings into my bags and rushed to a friend's house. I left my kids with my spouse and asked relatives to check on them the following day. But later on, during the night, I worried about my children and went back for them and sent them off to my parents' rural home.

I became a wandering refugee in my own country. I went back to my friend's house. He was the only person I could think of, because I suddenly realised that when you're in that kind of trouble, you are virtually on your own. Very few people want to have anything to do with you.

The enormity of living in a country that does not value human rights hit me like a tonne of bricks.

My life changed dramatically. Not only did I have to abandon my house, but my car too, in case they spotted me driving around town. I sneaked into town now and again, but I felt very insecure and I had to rely on the country's increasingly decrepit and inefficient public transport. It was the rainy season and I caught a heavy cold which kept me bed-ridden for days.

Come Christmas, my friend had to travel with his family. What was I to do? I did not feel comfortable being left alone in someone else's house. Fortunately, an uncle took me in and for two weeks I did not set foot outdoors. I slept, ate, watched TV and slept again. I was afraid to answer calls on my mobile in case it was the police.

After the festive period, the kids came back from my parents' home so they could go to school. It was another headache, because my spouse was also now on the run. A long-time friend took the kids in. It was traumatic for them because they did not know what had happened to their mum and dad.

I got word that the police were now searching vigorously for me and other VOP Radio executives. Ten policemen were permanently stationed outside the house of one of my colleagues. At another board member's place, they harassed and arrested a gardener and a driver, and broke a picture frame containing my colleague's photograph, which they took away with them.

Finally, our lawyer intervened and took me and other senior colleagues to the police station, where six of us were charged with broadcasting without a license under the country's draconian media laws, which heavily constrain press freedom. Strictly speaking, we were not actively broadcasting, but merely sending taped reports to the Netherlands for subsequent transmission from Madagascar.

We were fingerprinted and photographed before appearing in court, where we were remanded on bail, each with orders to report regularly to Harare Central Police Station.

It was a relief to return to my own home after two months on the run. The grass was overgrown and water and electricity had been cut off because of unpaid bills. We had little money because our income dried up with the collapse of VOP.

We have been reduced to near-destitution because in the police state that Zimbabwe has become other organisations are afraid to employ us. We remain on remand to this day, and are waiting anxiously to see what happens next.

The VOP was established through a Communications Trust registered by the Government of Zimbabwe in the run-up to the 2000 parliamentary elections as an alternative voice to the only other registered broadcaster, the government-owned Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation.

We applied for a broadcast license, but were refused one - which was absurd because the mandate of the broadcasting authority, on paper at least, was to ensure plurality on the airwaves.

Police found no broadcasting equipment, only computers, during the most recent raid on our offices, although we are charged among other things with transmitting broadcasts illegally. Our counsel, the

distinguished human rights lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa, brought an expert witness, Amon Matambo, an engineer, who – in his testimony - defined broadcasting as the transmission of an audio or television signal via a transmitter.

Matambo told Harare magistrate Rebecca Takawadi that mere possession of computers, recorders and microphones could not be construed as constituting the act of "transmitting" broadcasts.

We, the accused, did not possess the necessary equipment and gadgets to transmit programmes. Matambo further argued that broadcasting via the Netherlands and Madagascar did not constitute broadcasting "in" Zimbabwe. Zimbabwean radio listeners were merely recipients of products transmitted from Madagascar.

Our case has been adjourned and we return to court on April 27. We do not know what will happen. Long ago we applied for a broadcasting license, but all applicants other than state radio have had their applications turned down.

The government obviously considers us dangerous.

In August 2002, government agents planted a bomb and blew up our offices in Harare, destroying our computers, recording equipment and files. Then last October the Chinese brought in equipment which was used to jam our signal from Madagascar.

Defending freedom of thought and speech in Africa, and particularly in Zimbabwe, is not for the faint-hearted. But we take comfort from the fact that someone like former Liberian president Charles Taylor has been arrested and will be put on trial for crimes against humanity.

Our struggle is tough and often dangerous. We want a mature democracy, and we know that tyrants do fall and freedom will one day prevail.

**Location:** [Africa](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

**Topic:** [Water](#) <sup>[4]</sup>

**Focus:** [Zimbabwe Crisis Reports](#) <sup>[5]</sup>

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[1] <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/zimbabwean-radio-journalists-face-trial>

[2] <https://iwpr.net/people/import>

[3] <https://iwpr.net/global/africa>

[4] <https://iwpr.net/topics/water>

[5] <https://iwpr.net/programme/zimbabwe-crisis-reports>