



Bulawayo. Zimbabwe.

March 2007

Zimbabwe has remained in the headlines of our local paper for a number of days now, concentrating on the severe brutality and systematic dismantling of the country's once flourishing economy. I would like to bring to people's attention another scenario that is unfolding with regards to a group of people who are desperate, down trodden and absolutely broke due to Robert Mugabe's tyranny.

Imagine saving your entire life for your retirement, wisely investing and religiously contributing to a super fund, only to find upon reaching those golden years that you are unable to afford even one loaf of bread - a month! This is the frightening situation that the majority of old age pensioners have now found themselves living in Zimbabwe.

With a soaring inflation rate of well over 1500% and therefore a totally out of control cost of living, many Zimbabweans, and in particular the old folk, are finding themselves in the humiliating position of not being able to support themselves and are having to rely on the already struggling local community for assistance. Groceries, medical & dental expenses, medication, rents, rates and taxes and essential amenities can no longer be covered by their meager pensions.

A pension from the railways for example, is a mere **ZWS\$600 per month** (3 Australian cents) - a loaf of bread in December cost **ZWS\$850** (4c), but now 4 months later costs a staggering **ZWS\$4300** which equates with the foreign exchange increase as well to 23c. With this in mind you can imagine how a hair cut or trip to the theatre, a game of bowls or even a visit to a friend's house are all long forgotten luxuries, as even fuel is a rare and expensive commodity (ZWD15000 per litre – AU\$0.83). It is a daily struggle merely to find a loaf of bread let alone finding the means to pay for it. Now these commodities might sound excessively cheap but not when you're only receiving a 3c per month pension!

In 2002 a group of people in Bulawayo, the second largest city in Zimbabwe, got together and formed an organization called S.O.A.P (supporting old age pensioners) after an auctioneer noticed more and more elderly people bringing in small items to sell in order just to buy basic food items. The group then began to deliver monthly food parcels made

up of donations received from various businesses and caring citizens – this delivery round then took about 80 minutes. Over the years as more and more people are either ‘discovered’ or come forward to ask for assistance it now takes 4 people over 6 hours each to deliver these sometimes life saving goods to 182 people on the second Wednesday of every month. It should be noted that these volunteers take nothing personally from any donations received for any of the expenses incurred and only the cost of the email account and post office box is paid for by monies received. Their fuel, all phone costs, stationery, time and any other expenditure are all donated by them to SOAP.

Unfortunately there are many more old folk living there who are either too proud to ask for help or are now so isolated from society that they are not aware of the help available. The volunteers spend many hours coordinating the collection of donations either in the form of food or cash, in order to put together these precious parcels. At present +/- AU\$2880 (ZWS\$52 000 000.00) is spent per month purchasing basic items such as toilet rolls, toothpaste, tin vegetables, laundry soap, cooking oil, cordial, spaghetti and sugar. In December 2006 SOAP needed ZWS\$10 000 000.00 to purchase the same goods thus the effect of inflation in a few short months.

That might only be approximately AU\$15 per person per month but in Zimbabwe dollar terms this is a lot of money. Luckily through the generous donations from local businesses each recipient may also receive a chicken or 250g packet of mince meat, a few eggs, a couple of tomatoes, a tiny block of cheese and butter and a packet or two of milk - per month!

Having been involved in various fundraising events for SOAP prior to leaving Zimbabwe, I decided to return in December to see for myself just how badly the situation had deteriorated. I joined Dave Gill, one of the volunteers, on his December delivery round and sadly witnessed first hand some of the most heart wrenching stories:- a lady eating black jacks (a common garden weed) and figs from her garden, some forced to eat dog food as they were unable to afford any meat and a few even moving into their garages so that they could rent out their houses for some sort of income. Throughout my stay I came across countless stories of elderly people desperately trying to make ends meet. Never had I imagined that this once happy and content generation, who were the back bone of a once thriving community, would be reduced to standing at their gates humbly accepting a few small items to help them survive the days ahead.

In view of these tragic circumstances, myself and a group of other concerned ex-Zimbabweans now living in Perth, have got together to try and raise some much needed funds to help alleviate their desperate situation. We are therefore appealing to the generous people of Perth to throw their support behind our fun-filled fundraising evening to be held in the Swan Valley on Saturday the 28th of April. Well known Perth personality, Jamie Mercanti has provided much help for our cause and will also be performing with his fantastic band; Slim Jim and the Phatts, at the “Out of Africa” theme dinner at the exquisite Black Swan Winery.

Besides a sumptuous 4 course dinner, complimentary estate wine, raffles, prizes and all night dancing there will be an auction with an amazing selection of interesting items on offer, including a highly prized cricket bat signed by the Australian team after winning back the Ashes in Perth, in December 2006 and another one signed by the 2001 Zimbabwe cricket team.

We also have a special accommodation package at Hansons in the Valley which includes B&B in a stylish suite (some with spa), a bottle of house bubbly of arrival and a late check out on Sunday morning.

Fellow Zimbabwean, David Pocock, the youngest member of our Super 14 “Western Force” rugby team and most recent Man of the Match in Perth, will also be there to show his support for this worthy event.

So we ask you please to show your compassion for those less fortunate than yourselves and support this worthwhile cause. As a dynamic evening is guaranteed please book your tickets early!

For further information and tickets please contact the function coordinator :

Gayl Smythe gsmythe@bigpond.net.au

or:

Jane Lake: dougjane@bigpond.net.au

Shauna Sutherland: sutheys@hotmail.com