

## BEN FREETH'S COLUMN – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Before the Covid-19 lockdown in Zimbabwe that began on Monday 30 March 2020, I had a worrying discussion with Pastor Patrick, a brave cleric and friend who has spoken out consistently against the human rights abuses under both former President Robert Mugabe and President Emmerson Mnangagwa. Pastor Patrick has been put in jail many times but refuses to be silenced. I asked him: “What is the main issue in your community right now?”

“It’s the hunger,” he said. “The old people are suffering the most. Even those who have worked for 30 or 40 years are only getting a pension of 300 or 400 Zimbabwe dollars a month.” That’s only US\$10 - or 20 British pence a day. Those are the lucky ones. Most old people do not have pensions at all.



*Homeless, hungry people are struggling since the government imposed 21-day national lockdown against the spread of coronavirus started on March 30. Many seek refuge at night in bus termini, on shop verandas, sharing blankets and as a result cannot carry out social distancing, reports online website [NewZimbabwe.com](http://NewZimbabwe.com) Photo credit: NewZimbabwe.com*

Inflation continues to run at over 1,000 percent and the value of the Zimbabwe dollar has continued to fall. One Zimbabwe dollar has only approximately 2 percent of the buying power it had a year ago - and yet salaries have only increased in small amounts. The official minimum wage is now equivalent to less than 5 US\$ per month.

Civil servants have been getting the equivalent of approximately 1 US\$ per day. Understandably there is massive discontent - but protest action has been met with such force that the main form of “protest” remained a “vote with the feet” and escape to South Africa or elsewhere – until the lockdown changed everything and the borders were closed to virtually all but essential traffic.

One week into the lockdown, the economic and food situations are already even more difficult. Now, with the Coronavirus, the excuse for disbanding any gatherings or protests is much easier to rationalise. Zimbabwe went into lockdown for three weeks on Monday 30 March.



*Trucks line up at the Beitbridge border post between Zimbabwe and South Africa.  
Photo credit: Limpopo Mirror*

Food is having to be brought in to feed approximately 60 percent of the population, more than 8 million people. This is a staggering number to raise funds for, source sufficient food for and then coordinate the complex and challenging shipping and trucking logistics, compounded by the Covid-19 world-wide pandemic lockdowns. Unfortunately, the system that was used until recently has collapsed. This system involved international donors giving money to individuals through the Ecocash mobile phone system. Individuals could then buy food from local shops whose owners would ensure that their shops were stocked with food to sell.

Due to the powers that be only giving import licenses to connected people, and also due to the massive disparity in the official exchange rate and the real exchange rate, this system has now ceased to work. As a result, food is dished out en masse - which always ends up as a politically manipulative exercise of food for ruling party members only, in a political rally type situation.

**Coronavirus:** It's difficult to know how Corona will affect Zimbabwe. We can only pray that by a miracle, our climate or other factors make it less virulent. With our public health sector having less than 10 functioning respirators, a nurses' strike, as well as many of our doctors having left the country in recent months, and the public hospitals all in virtual shut-down, people who get it badly will not be able to get any medical help.

With the lockdown and hand-to-mouth situation for most people, given the 90% unemployment rate, vendors and others in the informal economy are really struggling to feed themselves and their families. Malnutrition and hunger of large sectors of the population is a greater concern than the virus at this stage.

In practical terms, Zimbabwe has fewer than 10 functioning respirators; nurses and doctors are barely paid – many have left the country or are on strike – and the public hospitals are all in virtual shut down.

In short, if the virus takes hold, the outlook is bleak.

We ask you all to pray for Zimbabwe at this critical and frightening time.

***Ben***

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