

SMS news for Zimbabweans

Radio journalists broadcasting news about Zimbabwe have turned to bulletins via mobile phones in order to beat the censors, the UK-based website Media Helping Media reports.

 Bylssa Sikiti da Silva 27 Feb 2007

As President Robert Mugabe (83) tightens his grip on power amid an unending economic meltdown, a wave of civil servants' strikes, ZANU-PF's internal struggles on the succession saga and the Government's ban on political rallies and protests, independent media in Zimbabwe is desperately doing whatever it can to disseminate news and information to concerned Zimbabweans, especially to an estimated four million living abroad.

After radio signals were blocked and jammed by China-sponsored devices, Gerry Jackson, the founder of SW Africa, a radio station broadcasting outside London, was quoted as saying: "Currently, we are most excited about our latest endeavour – sending SMS news headlines into Zimbabwe, via mobile phones.

Compressed into 160 characters

"We generate news headlines on a daily basis. In two months we have built a database of about 2000 mobile phones. But the challenge is to compress the complexity of Zimbabwe news stories into 160 characters, including spaces. But it works, and 100 new subscribers are signing up every day."

SW Africa started broadcasting in Zimbabwe in 2000 as the first independent radio station after Jackson won a court battle against the Government's broadcasting monopoly. Unfortunately, the station was closed down six days later at gunpoint, Jackson said, adding that a group of Zim journalists was then formed and the station was set up outside London.

"It would have made more sense to set up in one of the regional countries like South Africa but the region has shown a curious lack of support for democratic principles, human rights and press freedom in one of its neighbours," Jackson, a former employee of the Zim state broadcaster, lamented.

Reacting to the news, Magugu Nyathi, a Zimbabwean journalist exiled in South Africa, told Bizcommunity.com: "The situation between the Government and the independent media is very bad. The Mugabe regime is trying as much as it can to suppress the independent voices, which tell the truth.

"All the Government wants is for people to read, listen and watch the state-run media, which is full of praise of Mugabe."

Not the first time

Nyathi, who worked for *The Tribune* newspaper before it was shut down by the Government in June 2004 added: "This is not the first time that a radio station is banned. They did it with VOP, whose directors were arrested and offices were burned down, and the station moved out of the country.

"At some stage, the Government also confiscated radios belonging to listeners from the rural areas who mostly listened to the independent station called Studio 7.

“Frankly, we do not know when and how this situation will end. What pains me is the fact that people have a platform to voice their anger and dissatisfaction. Everyone is deprived of the freedom of expression and association.”

Zimbabwe police have used the Public Order and Security Act to ban all political rallies and street protests saying they could trigger a wave of uprising events against the Government.

Above the law

A rally organised recently by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was disrupted by police despite the opposition party having the court's go-ahead to do so. “It does not matter what the courts decide, Mugabe is above the law,” Nyathi said.

More than 80% of people live in countries with no free press, according to the Media Development Loan Fund (MDLF), a New York-based non-profit organisation providing low-cost financing to independent news media in emerging democracies.

Reports say that Africa is the worst place on earth for media muzzling. Many observers wonder why the question of media freedom has never been debated during the gatherings of the African Union and Pan African Parliament.

“The whole of Africa is in shambles,” Nyathi remarked. “That is why no African president would stand up to Mugabe to say he must make things right, while they know that their own houses are in the mess.”

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

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