

Letter from Zimbabwe

Dear Family and Friends,

This week the world watched how bad behaviour on a reality TV programme in the UK became international headlines. Diplomatically described as "alleged racist bullying" by women celebrities on a Big Brother TV series, the story ran as top world news for four days. People held protests and burnt banners in India, the British Prime Minister had to answer questions in the House of Commons and viewers of the TV programme increased from 1,7 to almost 6 million people in four days.

In Zimbabwe, while this was happening, reality was also on display; not on TV with histrionics, not with make up and nail varnish, but just the grim, grinding reality of everyday events that the world seems to have turned its back on.

Long before dawn I received a phone call with the news that an elderly man had died. For the family the pain and grief of the loss was almost immediately swamped with the horrific reality attached to dying in Zimbabwe in January 2007. Doctors have been on strike for over a month and hospital mortuaries are overflowing. The body of the deceased had to be moved, immediately. Petrol has increased in price from 2900 zim dollars a litre on Monday to 3400 dollars a litre by Friday. It was going to cost a whole month's pension for the new widow to have her late husband's body moved the few kilometres to the funeral home.

None of the man's family are left in Zimbabwe. The request was made for a cremation so that the ashes could be later given to the family. Cremations are undertaken in Harare but there is no gas in the country for the ovens. It may be three weeks, at the very least, before a cremation could be done. For each single day that the body was kept at the funeral home the widow would be charged half of her entire monthly pension.

A wood fuelled cremation could be done but only in Mutare, a town 180 kilometres away. The funeral home wanted 700 000 dollars to transport the body - the same as two and half years of the woman's pension. The quoted cost for the cremation, including the transport, was the same as five years of the widow's pension.

A simple burial in a local cemetery in the least expensive coffin now costs 400 000 dollars. This is the same as six months salary for one of the doctors presently on strike.

Young and old, professionals and workers - we are all alike in this horrible reality of Zimbabwe - we cannot afford to live or to die here.

This is reality in Zimbabwe. Not reality TV, not a game show, just grim, sickening reality. We are a country that needs and deserves the world's attention. Is anyone watching?

Until next week, thanks for reading,

Love Cathy.

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