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### **Zimbabwe's dead "cross over" to South Africa**

BEITBRIDGE – Authorities at Beitbridge Hospital on Zimbabwe's border with South Africa have resorted to "temporarily exporting" dead bodies to Mussina town on the other side of the frontier for storage there because the hospital morgue has become too small.

Sources told ZimOnline that the mortuary at the state hospital was too small for an ever increasing number of patients dying there resulting in many corpses having to be ferried across to the South African side for storage until relatives can bury them.

In most cases it was the relatives who footed the bill to transport the bodies of their deceased loved ones across to Mussina while hospital and immigration authorities only ensured that bodies moved to the South African side were returned to Zimbabwe once relatives were ready to bury them.

Hospital and immigration authorities at Beitbridge, one of the busiest border posts in Africa, refused to comment on the matter saying they were not permitted to speak to the media. They referred questions to their head offices in Harare.

Health Minister David Parirenyatwa could not be reached for comment on the matter while Home Affairs Minister Kembo Mohadi, under whose portfolio immigration falls, confirmed that dead bodies were being moved across to South Africa for storage but said this was done only after permission from relatives.

He said: "What I know is that the mortuary is very small ... at times it becomes overwhelmed because of the high volume of traffic in Beitbridge which results in accidents, this results in other people taking the corpses to Mussina but this is done on a voluntary basis."

Mohadi, who is the Member of Parliament for the area, said efforts were under way to raise funds for the expansion of the mortuary at Beitbridge to ensure it is able to take all the bodies of people dying there.

Years of neglect and under-funding has seen Zimbabwe's public health sector - once a shining example to the developing world - collapsing with many hospitals able to prescribe nothing more than basic pain killers because there is no hard cash to import essential medicines and equipment.

State health officials, themselves disgruntled because of poor pay and working conditions, privately admit that many deaths occurring at public hospitals could be avoided if only basic medicines and equipment were available.

Public hospitals are the source of health services for about 90 percent of Zimbabwe's 12 million people.

A burgeoning HIV/AIDS pandemic that is killing at least 2 000 Zimbabweans every week has only helped worsen the situation with mortuaries at most major hospitals filled up to the brim with dead bodies.

A severe fuel crisis, itself the result of acute foreign currency shortages, is only exacerbating the situation as relatives are unable to collect the dead bodies for burial on time because they have no diesel or petrol to transport them to cemeteries.

In a vivid illustration of how public health services have regressed on the back of a deepening economic crisis, the government last year introduced ox-drawn ambulances to ferry ill people to health centres in some remote rural areas.

The ox-drawn carts - which health officials said were a desperate measure because there was no money to repair broken down ambulances or buy new ones – were introduced after the National Railways of Zimbabwe also brought back 1950s steam locomotives because it could not afford to run its modern electric and diesel locomotives.

Zimbabwe's economic decline, which the World Bank has said is unprecedented in a country not at war, has seen inflation surging beyond 350 percent while Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has contracted by more than 30 percent since 1999. - ZimOnline