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Poor and Expected to Give for Mugabe's Bash

By Staff Reporter

Zimbabweans, struggling to make ends meet amid hyper-inflation, are being asked to dig into their pockets for a party this month to mark President Robert Mugabe's 83rd birthday, an official said on Monday.

"We are looking for Z\$300-million that will be used at the birthday celebrations in Gweru," Emmanuel Fundira, chairperson of the 21st February Movement, told AFP on Monday.

"Some of the funds will be contributed by the country's ten provinces who will donate Z\$15-million each. The remainder of the funds will be donated by individuals like myself and others."

Mugabe is set to turn 83 on February 21, the date that Zanu PF has traditionally thrown a massive party attended by thousands of party loyalists and diplomats.

The fund-raising committee has so far raised Z\$87-million in cheques and pledges for the party to be held in Gweru, Fundira said.

This year's celebrations will be held under the theme "Empowerment, Prosperity and Peace," Fundira said.

Once a regional model, Zimbabwe's economy has been on the slide for nearly eight years with inflation now at a world record of nearly 1,600 percent. Previously unheard of food shortages are now widespread as at least 80 percent of the population living below the poverty line.

Families often resort to skipping meals, striking ingredients like butter and milk off shopping lists and cycling or walking long distances to work.

Mugabe, who has ruled Zimbabwe since independence from Britain in 1980, has been ostracised by the West over allegations of human rights abuse and rigging elections.

The 21st February Movement was set up in 1986 as a welfare organisation to mark Mugabe's birthday.

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