

Arrested for taking photos in Zimbabwe

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Just hours after landing in Zimbabwe, I was sitting in a police station being interrogated. This is life under President Robert Mugabe, whose image stares at you from photographs in the Harare airport.

He is everywhere, ruling Zimbabwe through menace, playing on fears and imagination.

It wasn't long before I felt the full impact of the Mugabe regime. As soon as my flash burst, as I was photographing people queuing for sugar, soldiers moved towards me, dragging me through the gates to the warehouse beyond.

The crowd of mainly women, calling for their ration, fell silent and parted to let me through.

With a billy club slapping against his thigh, a soldier demanded to see the photo.

"You are under arrest my friend. It is a very big offence."

My passport taken and camera confiscated, I was told to stand and wait.

The soldier returned, demanding my identity card, stumped that I had none.

I stood in the alleyway behind the gates being pressed close by those wanting sugar until the soldiers instructed I follow. One leading, and one behind, they led me to the Harare Central Police Station, where I was taken to the intelligence section.

Police officers took the soldiers' statements, and possession of my passport and camera. I was instructed to sit on the concrete floor, knees to my chest, and wait.

In the four hours that followed, a series of police officers interrogated me. Some were gentle, others harsh: "Are you a journalist? What do you do for a job? Why are you here?"

Knowing other foreign journalists had been deported, I replied: "I'm a teacher and I'm here for the cricket."

As I waited, outside night fell and a single bulb in the ceiling came on, giving little light. A man was seated next to me, his camera also taken. During a break in the questioning I asked what he had done. "I am a journalist. I took a photograph. It's the way it is," he said.

Another man was lead through, who also told police he was a journalist. They were both local men, and faced hefty fines for their crime.

Faced with prison or the next flight out, I stuck with my story for four hours. Then I was led to an office and offered a chair; relief after hours of sitting with my knees to my chest.

The questioning continued, but it was drawing to an end.

My camera was produced, and I was ordered to delete the single image of the sugar queue.

Having done so, I was told to take no more photographs, and my passport was returned.

The police, having decided to release me, were generous in finding me a taxi and warning me that Harare was dangerous at night. One took the taxi driver's details, and insisted I call once safe at my hotel.

We left, through the crowded streets in night-time Harare.

All this trouble for a photo.

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