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Forex Crisis Forces Harare to Suspend Issuing of Passports

By Staff Reporter

HARARE—Zimbabwe's registry office has stopped issuing identification cards, passports and other crucial documents to citizens as an acute shortage of foreign currency—required to import production material—appears to be steadily crippling vital state departments and enterprises.

Zimbabwe has grappled with a severe foreign currency crisis since 1999 and itself the result of an unprecedented economic meltdown described by the World Bank as the worst in the world outside a war zone.

Senior officials at Registrar General's office said that the office, that had managed to "just get by" since the foreign currency shortages started, had now suspended the issuing of identity cards and passports altogether because there is no hard cash to pay foreign suppliers of the special ink and films used to produce the documents.

"We have shortages of chemicals to develop films and we are expecting to be able to resume issuing these documents in January," said one official, who declined to be named because he did not have the permission of Registrar General Tobaiwa Mudede to disclose such information to the Press.

Mudede, whose department is the government's documentation nerve centre and also provides materials such as ballot papers during elections, was yesterday said by his office to be busy attending meetings and unable to take questions from reporters.

Sources said the registry office that used to issue metal identity cards but had replaced these with cheaper plastic cards had now stopped issuing even the plastic cards.

All adult Zimbabweans are required by law to have identity cards.

The registry office was also no longer issuing passports except only to senior government officials and sick people wishing to travel outside the country for treatment.

The rest of Zimbabweans can only get temporary emergency travel documents enabling them to visit specific destinations.

The registry department's offices in Harare at Magaba Shopping Centre, Makombe Building, Hatfield Sub office, Mabvuku and Parirenyatwa had scores of people, milling around dejected after they were turned away by officials who said there was no ink or paper to process documents.

Most of those turned away wanted passports—a much sought after document among Zimbabweans who regularly trek to neighbouring countries especially South Africa and Botswana to look for food in short supply at home.

The registry department is however only one in a long list of government institutions and enterprises that have had operations severely disrupted because of a shortage of hard cash.

For example, state-owned Air Zimbabwe was earlier this month forced to suspend flights to Britain for fear its planes could be seized by creditors it had failed to pay because it did not have foreign currency.

And the national rail network is on the brink of collapse, with frequent accidents taking place because the National Railways of Zimbabwe does not have hard cash to import spares, signals equipment or new wagons and engines.

On the other hand, electricity, fuel, essential medicines, farming inputs, machine parts and raw materials for industry are in short supply because there is no hard cash to pay foreign suppliers.

Western governments and the main opposition Movement for Democratic Change party blame Zimbabwe's foreign currency and economic crisis on repression and mismanagement by President Robert Mugabe. He denies the charge.

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