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Zimbabwe Human Rights Record Under Scrutiny

By Staff Reporter

The human rights record of Zimbabwe was under the spotlight on Wednesday with critics blasting a proposed surveillance Bill and the failure to resettle hundreds of thousands whose homes were razed last year.

In a further blow, the once-vibrant tobacco sector hit a new low on the last day of the auction season with sales expected to plummet 31%.

The Zimbabwe Parliament heard that the proposed Interception of Communications Bill allowing the state to monitor phone calls, faxes and e-mails, flouts basic human rights.

"The bill represents a step backwards and is inconsistent with international standards on human rights and other legal requirements," Wilbert Mandinde, of the Media Alliance of Zimbabwe told a parliamentary committee.

Lawyer Jessie Majome said the Bill, unveiled by President Robert Mugabe's government in May, gave "too much power to the minister of transport and communications, who plays the dual role of judge and jury".

The Bill empowers the minister to issue a warrant to intercept communications between individuals or organisations and also to hear appeals from those objecting to the interception of their correspondence.

Under the proposed law, telecommunication service providers will be compelled to install monitoring devices.

Jim Holland of the Zimbabwe Internet Service Providers' Association said many operators could close shop if they failed to raise foreign currency to import equipment they will be forced to install on computers.

The government says the move is aimed at combating international terrorism and espionage.

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