



Information Highway To The World Beyond Zimbabwe

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'Globalization insights' is a series of feature stories told by journalists from Africa, Asia and Latin America – stories that give an insight into the perceptions and experiences of people as globalization unfolds in their environs. This project is jointly organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and IPS EUROPA.

As if afraid to be noticed, Joseph Mudzimba, a 24-year-old private in the Zimbabwe National Army, quickly slips into an Internet café located in the heart of the Harare central business district. He does so every evening after performing guard duties at a military barracks.

Clad in his green military fatigues, Joseph steadfastly ignores the pointed stares of civilian Internet browsers. In Zimbabwe, the sight of a soldier in full battle gear is enough to make civilians uneasy because the army has a fierce reputation gained from years of brutally suppressing anti-government demonstrations.

Joseph's discomfort is soon reduced when three nervous looking uniformed police officers enter the Internet cafe and crowd before one computer, looking very unsure of them.

Three giggling nurses in white uniform, obviously comfortable with using the computer, also enter the café and are

soon intent on surfing the Internet.

The use of the Internet has increased overwhelmingly in Zimbabwe over the past five years. The information highway has become an escape route for a population eager to find employment and study opportunities in Europe, USA, Canada and Australia.

Joseph explains why he and other members of the security forces are always uneasy about using Internet cafés. "We are afraid of using the public internet cafes because although it has not been officially communicated to us, those found using the Internet would have to prove that they were not sending military information to countries perceived to be enemies of Zimbabwe."

Although many Zimbabweans, especially the younger generations are computer literate, the high costs of computers, connection and service fees limit the number of people with Internet facilities in their homes.

Those privileged with access to the Internet are mainly senior company executives, secretaries and other desk-bound workers. This has resulted in long queues forming outside Internet Service Providers (ISPs).

But for Joseph and other young Zimbabweans, the Internet has become an employment agency as they spend

thousands of their hard-earned worthless Zimbabwean dollars in search of a better future.

Statistics provided by the Zimbabwean government indicate that a staggering 3.4 million people out of 12 million are exiled either as political or economic refugees.

Out of that figure 1.1 million Zimbabweans have found sanctuary in Britain, Zimbabwe's former colonial master. 1.2 million are in neighbouring South Africa. Another million are scattered in other parts of the world. Australia is home to a further 100,000 Zimbabweans.

Joseph says following the closure of 'The Daily News', 'The Daily News on Sunday' and 'The Tribune' – all privately owned newspapers – many members of the armed forces are resorting to the Internet to find out what is really going on in their country.

"The government owned media like 'The Herald', 'The Chronicle', 'The Sunday Mail' and national radio and television will not give a true account of what is taking place in the country. We can find out what is happening in our country by surfing the websites of BBC and CNN on the Internet," says Joseph.

Ironically, both CNN and BBC are banned from operating in Zimbabwe.

John Robertson, an economic consultant describes the economy of the Southern African country: "The Zimbabwean economy is the worst performing in the world among countries not involved in a war."

Seeking greener pastures in foreign armies

Joseph says poor salaries in the police; intelligence and the military are driving them to the Internet to seek jobs or scholarships to further their education overseas.

"The salaries that we get in the civil service are so bad that most of us live from hand to mouth. A lot of younger soldiers and policemen are using the Internet to join military forces in developed countries," says Joseph.

One of the reasons why many armed officers are afraid of using the public Internet facilities, says Joseph, is that they would be accessing military websites of foreign powers like Britain, USA and Canada, sworn enemies of the Zimbabwean government.

An employee at the Internet café said over the weekend, a large number of their customers accessed websites of military powers for recruitment purposes. "On Saturdays,

we get many people accessing the recruitment websites of western military powers while some of them actually come to ask how for example they could join the British Army."

The Zimbabwean government has already demonstrated that it abhors having its nationals joining the uniformed forces of its 'enemies'.

During the invasion of Iraq by coalition forces led by the U.S. and Britain in 2003, the repatriation of the body of a Zimbabwean soldier killed during the war caused a lot of embarrassment in the official corridors of power for a government that gave muted support to Saddam Hussein.

Spirited attempts by the government to block the repatriation of the body failed, though this resulted in burial being delayed.

Joseph says the soldiers, like many other Zimbabweans are prepared to do menial jobs, which will enable them to earn the strong foreign currencies like the Euro, the pound sterling and the U.S. dollar.

"We are not really choosy about which jobs we get but naturally we would prefer something that we have already been trained for," he says.

Figures indicate that hundreds of Zimbabwean officers from the uniformed services have gone AWOL after managing to acquire the elusive visa to Europe and North America. But with authorities in Zimbabwe eager to control what the locals can read, listen to or watch, E-Mails deemed 'to carry subversive or offensive material' are now being blocked.

Although the Supreme Court ruled that it would be unconstitutional to monitor all electronic mail, attempts continue to compel ISPs to block E-Mails deemed to be inimical to the country's laws.

Many E-Mail users have received messages that their mails have not been delivered because they carried offensive messages.

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe indicated his desire to control the information highway in December 2003 when he told the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva that developed countries were undermining the security and national interests of poor developing countries through "information technology superiority".

The southern African country, which believes it is under siege from western countries, appears to have borrowed the idea from attempts by the George W Bush Administration to monitor the Internet and electronic mail as part of the "War on Terror".

The U.S. Congress blocked the move, saying it would amount to a violation of the rights of the American people.

An information technology specialist, Hardy Shava, said it would be easy for the government to monitor all electronic mail as TelOne, the state-owned telecommunications company, was in charge of the information gateway.

Shava said: "The internet service providers are engaged in a legal battle with the state owned telecommunications company, TelOne, which has a monopoly over the control of the information highway while at the same time operating internet service cafes which would enjoy an unfair advantage."

The information technology expert said: "Internet Service Providers are not willing to be used to monitor the information highway, because this would infringe on the free flow of information while the expensive technology to monitor electronic mail would have to be installed by the service providers."

For people like Joseph, who is still battling to be recruited in the British military, the doors to Europe and the U.S. might be slammed in his face.

"With authorities monitoring our electronic mail, I fear that any attempts on my part to be recruited in the military of foreign powers could land me in very serious trouble," says Joseph dejection writ large on his face.

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