

***The Government Silenced Zimbabwe's Only Independent Newspaper***

**'Voiceless people depend on people like me to speak out on their behalf and reveal the truth'**



Wilf Mbanga, the founding chief executive of the now-silenced Daily News in Zimbabwe, these days joins teenage Dutch pupils in on their annual field trip. He discusses environmental issues with local administrators in public. He dresses up to take part in carnival. He watches soccer matches of the Dutch "orange XI" during the European Championship in his favourite local pub, dressed in a bright orange t-shirt. He writes about this and many more events in a weekly column for the regional daily Brabants Dagblad, with a light touch.

Mbanga's words are sometimes humorous, but they always convey a serious undertone that keeps one mindful that his country, Zimbabwe, lacks freedom of expression and its corrupt government has destroyed the economy through greed and mismanagement and forced his independent newspaper to shut down. Eighty percent of the 12 million Zimbabweans now live below the poverty line, people are starving and oppressed, and still the rest of the world pays scant attention.

Wilf Mbanga now lives with his wife, Trisha, in the city of Tilburg in the southern Dutch province of North Brabant close to the border with Belgium, where he has been given a year "in asylum," as part of the International Network of Cities of Asylum (INCA) that replaced the International Parliament of Writers (IPW), which began in 1994 as an initiative of Carrefour des Litteratures. Two of the Mbanga's three grown-up children, his 27-year old son and 25-year old daughter, stayed in Zimbabwe, while their younger son, 24, studies in the United States. He received this opportunity after his name was put forward by the Prince Claus Fund, named after the late husband of the Dutch Queen Beatrix, who had a strong interest in development issues and cultural diversity.

In a long interview I had with him six months after his arrival in November 2003, Mbanga called this opportunity "a fantastic experience." He told me, "Here I can write from the heart, honestly. I don't have to look over my shoulder in fear of being arrested again. I would like to see more cities of asylum established because there are many more writers being displaced around the world", says Mbanga, in the small living room with a computer-corner as its hub, in their temporary home in the centre of the town.

Mbanga is the first journalist Tilburg invited since the city joined the worldwide City of Asylum Network in 2002. For him and Trisha it means a breathing space in a life which "has been quite hectic during the past couple of years." After founding Zimbabwe's only independent newspaper, the Daily News, in 1998, Mbanga lost the struggle with the "corrupt and murderous" government of President Robert Mugabe in the summer of 2003. It was then that the "only newspaper in Zimbabwe that told the facts as they were" was shut down.

According to Mbanga, his paper played a key role in the 1999 emergence of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party, in the national referendum on constitutional reforms held in early 2000 and the general elections later that year. "The Daily News gave the MDC a voice and informed the world of the vicious government crackdown on the opposition before, during and after the elections. It exposed the massive electoral fraud involved in both the general election of 2000 and the presidential election in 2002," the paper's former chief executive says. At the end of 2001, he left the paper to start a communications consulting business.

### **Zimbabwe's Government and the Daily News**

The Daily News was set up as an alternative voice to the government-owned mass media, which kowtowed to the corrupt leadership. "There was a desperate need for the facts, for fair comment and fearless reporting. The Daily News pledged itself to observe the highest standards of integrity and fairness; to produce a quality newspaper that would strive to 'tell it like it is,'" Mbanga said. "We knew that these principles would put us on a collision course with the government. But we had to do it; we had to expose this murderous regime."

Soon after the paper hit the streets in 1999, it surpassed the circulation numbers of the government-owned national daily, The Herald. The initial print runs of the independent daily were limited to 60,000 by the capacity of its printing press and unavailability of newsprint. Later this rose to 120,000. People lined up to buy the limited copies. Independent advertising statistics confirmed that every copy was read by at least seven Zimbabweans, from all walks of life.

They could read breaking stories, such as the ones about the 1,150 percent salary hike for the president and cabinet ministers at a time when 80 percent of the population were living below the poverty line; about the first lady's multi-million dollar shopping sprees abroad while the industry back home ground to halt for lack of foreign exchange to buy spare parts; about the allocation of grabbed white farms to political cronies and key

defence force officers; and about desperate shortages of fuel, bread, staple maize meal and bank notes.

"Revealing the facts about their corruption and mismanagement really makes bad rulers mad. They don't like it when you get to the truth. With so many skeletons in the cupboard they get very irate when you start digging for the facts. Therefore the closure of the newspaper was really no surprise to us," Mbanga said. "What is surprising is that it did not happen sooner, as Mugabe's government became increasingly paranoid after the founding of the MDC - which was the first viable opposition to its 20-year rule."

"Why then did it take so long before the Daily News was banned?" I asked him.

"Good question. First, to put the facts straight, the Daily News is not banned," its founder replies dryly. "It has merely been refused registration to operate as a newspaper because it has failed to comply with the requirements of the newspaper registration law of Zimbabwe. Mugabe is a very smart dictator who obtained two law degrees while he was in prison under Rhodesian rule from 1961 till 1974. He likes legal niceties. Throughout his rule, he has taken great pains to ensure that new legislation is passed to facilitate his most illegal activities."

In the case of the newspaper's closure, the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) provided the legal framework. Jonathan Moyo, an avowed enemy of the independent media, drafted the legislation in 2000 after he was appointed Minister of State for information and publicity. AIPPA was enacted in 2002, but staff at the Daily News already had to endure harassments long before then.

"By the way, the acronym means in Shona, my vernacular and the language of Mugabe and three quarters of Zimbabweans, 'he has gone bad.' And, of course, the AIPPA is completely misnamed. There is no freedom of information in my country and no protection of privacy. Anyway, the harassment started on a minor scale. Party faithfuls of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) would confiscate copies of the newspaper, tearing them up and burning them. Readers of the paper were beaten up by party thugs and vendors were arrested by the police for 'blocking traffic'."

### **Harassment of the Press**

Towards the end, the harassment became more brutal. "The government began arresting Daily News reporters and denying them access to government information and functions – including official comments from the police communications department. Arrests of the editors, management and local investors followed. And then Geoff Nyarota, the paper's editor-in-chief, was arrested. He called me from his mobile phone to tell me that the police were on their way to pick me up as well, although I had left the paper and was only a shareholder in the company that owned it. I was taken in by four plain-clothes policemen and ended up in a tiny, stinking cell with 13 ordinary criminals.

"It was bizarre. We were interviewed by the international press. We kept our mobile phones and communicated with the outside. The next day we were taken to court, falsely accused of fraud and released on bail. We had to surrender our passports and to report to the police once a week. It was obvious that the police did not have a case against us and, during the trial a few weeks later, the magistrate dismissed the case as being without substance. The government appealed to the High Court but again the case was dismissed.

"The intimidation did not stop though. My phone was tapped. I was followed by men wearing dark glasses. Unexplained incidents started to happen. All of a sudden I had people walking in my garden at night. They did not steal anything. They did not seem to have any intention of harming me physically. They just wanted to deprive me of sleep.

So I built an eight-foot wall around the house. And still they would come. I hired security guards on a quick-response system. These things are not good for your health. You do become paranoid. I would wake up several times during the night because I heard footsteps, but when I looked out of the window – there was nobody in my garden. It exhausted me. I could not concentrate on my work as a communications consultant. The invitation to stay in Tilburg for a year was heaven-sent.”

Mbanga calls the press situation in Zimbabwe ‘very depressing’. After the closure of the Daily News only two weeklies remain, with limited circulation, that are independent of the ruling party ZANU-PF. All the other publications are mouthpieces of the government. The electronic media is wholly government-owned. It comprises one television station and four radio stations, which constantly broadcast hate speeches by Mugabe and his officials and crude political jingles and slogans. “People can only listen to blatant propaganda. All day long. The government-owned mass media have lost all credibility,” Mbanga said. “They have degenerated into an unashamed party propaganda machine.”

In 2003, more than 50 Zimbabwean reporters working in the independent media were arrested and charged, but not convicted. “It is just harassment. They want to frighten you, so you obey the rules set by an unjust government. The bombing of our newspaper, twice, took the process a step further, resulting in the complete destruction of the printing presses. Nobody was arrested for these crimes.”

### **Mbanga’s Work as a Journalist**

It was “purely by accident” that Mbanga took to journalism in the late 1960s and got on-the-job training covering sports. “I was a keen tennis-player,” he said. He first met Robert Mugabe in 1974 when he had just been released from jail, where his opposition to British colonialism had landed him in 1961. Mbanga became a strong supporter of Mugabe. “I was very enthusiastic about his party, ZANU. Mugabe was preaching anti-racism, freedom, equality. For me he was the man. By then I was a political reporter, and obviously got to know on a personal level all the senior politicians, who went on to form the first Zimbabwean cabinet. Mugabe even became a close friend. We had attended the same secondary school. In 1981, a year after independence, the Minister of Information asked me to set up the country’s first national news agency, ZIANA, and in 1987 to start a new group of regional newspapers owned by the Zimbabwe Mass Media Trust (ZMMT). For 10 years I was the chief executive and editor-in-chief.”

During the mid-1990s Mbanga started to see Mugabe in a different light. “Mugabe cheated in the 1995 elections. He introduced draconian laws to suit himself. He was no longer the democrat we had thought he was and he began to trample on human rights. Now I know we were blinded. We desperately wanted Mugabe to succeed because blacks had been denied self-government for so long. We supported him and made excuses for him, always hoping that he would do the right thing. It took time to accept that the fish was rotting from the head, as the saying goes. Mugabe cashed in on the goodwill we all felt towards him. Now I see it clearly. One of my deepest regrets is that we did not see it then.”

The start of the short-lived Daily News marked the turning point in Mbanga’s relations with the government.

There are plenty of stories from Zimbabwe that Mbanga believes now need to be told – about the corrupt officials who enrich themselves and spend public money to live lives of luxury; about the economic mismanagement and plundering of state assets, which has caused massive unemployment and 600 percent inflation; about human rights abuses; about children being trained in militia camps to torture; and about women being systematically raped. He gives an example of the scandal about food: “Zimbabwe has fertile soil and a good irrigation system in place. But due to the chaotic and corrupt land

reform process, the production of maize - our staple diet – has plummeted. Millions are starving. The world wants to send maize, but Mugabe has refused permission. He wants to use food as a campaign tool. The price of a bag of maize meal has gone up to more than one month's salary for ordinary Zimbabweans. This is scandalous!"

Mbanga uses his stay outside Zimbabwe to try to inform the world about the deplorable situation in his motherland. In his weekly column in the regional Dutch newspaper, he invariably touches upon the problems suffered by the people in Zimbabwe. He gives lectures to many groups and institutions, such as the African Studies Centre in Leiden, and writes articles for newspapers such as Britain's Guardian and the Financial Times of London.

"I feel passionate about journalism. It is all about information and truth. I believe in the noble and age-old ethic of 'publish and be damned.'" Even if the consequences of my writing the truth are not pleasant for me, the truth has to be told. As long as I am in a position to tell it, it would be criminal not to. I need to bring about awareness of what is going on in Zimbabwe. I am a writer and I have to use this talent. Voiceless people depend on people like me to speak out on their behalf and reveal the truth."

Though the issues we spoke about during the interview were often sad and depressing, the room was often filled with the roar of Mbanga's laughter. He doesn't know what the future will bring, whether he and his wife will be able to return to their country. But he and Trisha are convinced that things will change.

"I am an optimist," he told me. "One day things will change for the better. Maybe not in my lifetime - but change will come..."

*Wilf Mbanga (1947) was the founding chief executive of the Daily News, an independent newspaper that was published in Zimbabwe. In 2002 he and Geoff Nyarota, the Daily News editor, received the Human Rights Watch Award for their efforts to bring freedom of the press to Zimbabwe.*

*Information on the Prince Claus Fund can be found at [www.princeclausfund.nl](http://www.princeclausfund.nl)  
Information on the International Network of Cities of Asylum (INCA) at [www.autodafe.org](http://www.autodafe.org)*

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