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In Zimbabwe Jail: A Reporter's Ordeal

By [BARRY BEARAK](#)

HARARE, [Zimbabwe](#) — I had never been arrested before and the prospect of prison in Zimbabwe, one of the poorest, most repressive places on earth, seemed especially forbidding: the squalor, the teeming cells, the possibility of beatings. But I told myself what I'd repeatedly taught my two children: Life is a collection of experiences. You savor the good, you learn from the bad.

I was being charged with the crime of “committing journalism.” One of my captors, Detective Inspector Dani Rangwani, described the offense to me as something despicable, almost hissing the words: “You’ve been gathering, processing and disseminating the news.”

And I'd been caught at it red-handed, my notes spread across my desk, my text messages readable on my cellphone, my stories preserved by Microsoft Word in an open laptop.

At one point, 21 policemen and detectives milled about my room at a small lodge in Harare, the capital. They knocked against one another as they ambled about, some kneeling, some on tiptoes, searching for clues in the cabinets and drawers. Men with rifles guarded the door.

They immediately found my two United States passports, ample evidence of subterfuge. One contained work papers indicating I was a reporter; the other, the one with my visa, said I had entered the country as a tourist.

“But you’re actually a journalist?” I was asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

“And you are not accredited in Zimbabwe?”

“No, I’m not.”

I had concerns well beyond myself, for certain Zimbabweans had been assisting me. Messages between us lived on in the phone. Whatever bad times lay ahead for me, I imagined things would undoubtedly be worse for these others, these friends.

One of the cops gripped the phone. “You’re in terrible trouble,” he admonished. His tone was menacing but there was also an odd curl to his smile that I took to be an invitation.

“Can you help me?” I whispered.

His right thumb was nimbly working the keypad of the phone, but then it dropped to his side and he used it to massage his forefinger, sign language for the universal lubricant of the greased palm. In a few minutes, I negotiated safe passage to the bathroom and left him \$100 in my shaving kit.

Then we stood shoulder to shoulder. “What’s this?” he’d demand accusingly as we scrolled through the messages. Each time I’d nod yes, he’d hit delete.

The crowded room was hot. Already, I felt jailed. I needed a breath of air, but when I moved toward the door, Detective Jasper Musadema, a well-built man in a jacket and tie, stopped me. He had been the most threatening of the police. “If you try to go outside...” he said sternly, stopping in midsentence. He made his hand into a gun and pulled the trigger.

“You’ll kill me?” I asked.

“Good,” he remarked wryly. “Then you’ve seen that movie.”

An Electoral Limbo

I’d come to Zimbabwe to cover the March 29 elections, momentous times in a contentious country. History was taking a gallant turn against long-shot odds. [Robert Mugabe](#), the enduring political chameleon who’d led the nation since its liberation from Britain in 1980, seemed on the cliff edge of defeat.

Day after day, Zimbabwe languished in a peculiar limbo. While the government refused to release the results of the presidential race, totals already had been

posted at every polling station and there were solid reasons to think that Mr. Mugabe, the 84-year-old president, had suffered an unexpected comeuppance.

This must have come as a shock to the “old man,” as Zimbabweans call him, not only since the election apparatus was so slanted in his favor but because he considered himself the father of his people. Knowledgeable sources told me the rebuke had at first left President Mugabe depressed and ready to concede.

His power had flourished through methodical cruelty, including the murder of thousands of people in the dissident stronghold of Matabeleland. As he and cronies then acquired lavish mansions and enormous bank accounts, he thrust the nation into a calamitous economic meltdown, the main precipitator being a misbegotten takeover of productive farms from white landowners.

Mr. Mugabe, who holds the genuine bona fides of a liberation hero, likes to present himself as one of freedom’s great champions. Maintaining a veneer of democracy is important to his image. Civic groups are permitted to meet so long as their messages fail to reach the masses. Courts can convene so long as Mr. Mugabe reserves the right to sweep aside inconvenient decisions. Elections can be held so long as political adversaries survive beatings and jailings and torture — and the results can be reliably rigged.

On April 3, the day I was arrested, my means of observing these mechanisms oddly shifted from a vantage point outside to one within. My own freedom would depend on those remnant smidgens of civil liberty still granted the citizenry — and on the many brave people who carry on unbowed against relentless intimidation.

The veneer of freedom Mr. Mugabe permits the press is applied with the thinnest of coats. Though some independent weeklies are allowed to publish, the state controls the only daily newspaper and television station. Most Western reporters are routinely denied entry.

I was new to Africa. My wife, Celia Dugger, and I arrived in January as The New York Times’s co-bureau chiefs in Johannesburg. With elections coming in Zimbabwe, I soon made two trips to Harare, each time taking ritualistic precautions for safety. I left my credentials and laptop at home, entered the

country as a tourist and interviewed people only behind closed doors. Each night, I destroyed my notes after e-mailing their contents to myself at an Internet cafe. I wrote my articles only upon returning to Johannesburg.

But the presidential election presented new complications. Daily articles needed to be filed. I had to openly work the streets, then go back to a room with a reliable wireless link to transmit from my laptop. Over time, normally wary reporters began taking risks that mocked earlier prudence, announcing their names and affiliations at opposition news conferences.

Necessity numbed my own caution. My articles required continuous updating for The Times's Web site, so there I'd be in downtown Harare, a backpack slung over my shoulder, dictating quotes from my notebook and spelling names into the wavering connection of the mobile phone. Early on, I had asked that my byline be kept from the articles. But other reporters were less guarded about revealing themselves in print. I eventually followed suit.

I was staying at York Lodge, a collection of eight cottages spread around a lovely expanse of shrubs and lawn. At age 58, after 33 years as a reporter, I'd like to think I have a nose for trouble, alert to danger like some frontier cavalry scout who tenses up at the sound of a suspicious birdcall.

But the police had been at the lodge for 45 minutes before I knew a thing. I was filing another update for the Web site when I left the room for a breather about 4 p.m. Maria Phiri, a tall, wiry detective in hoop earrings and a red dress, called out, "Hey you!" I was stunned.

Several men hurried my way. Their very first question had me reeling.

"Who are you?"

A Land of 'No Law'

Two reporters were rounded up at York Lodge; two others were warned away before returning from the field. The other unfortunate was Stephen Bevan, 45, an able British freelancer who works for The Sunday Telegraph.

We were taken in a pickup truck to the Harare Central Police Station, a large colonial-era complex colloquially known as Law and Order. The detectives' evident glee at our capture was soon tempered by the arrival of a familiar and implacable foe, Beatrice Mtetwa, the nation's top human rights lawyer.

She is a striking woman with rectangular glasses and a neatly trimmed Afro.

"There is no crime called 'committing journalism,' whether it is with accreditation or without," she informed us privately in her exaggerated, lawyerly diction. This was actually news to us — and quite a relief. In fact, the law had been amended in January. It was now only illegal to falsely claim to be accredited, and neither Stephen nor I had done that.

But Ms. Mtetwa also explained the sinister realities of a woebegone place: "Ultimately, there is no law in Zimbabwe. Your governments can't apply pressure; the British and the Americans have negative influence here. The police will hold you as long as they want." She was president of the nation's law society. The police had beaten her with truncheons the year before.

Her colleague, Alec Muchadehama, had recently spent time in the Harare Central cells that now loomed before us. "This is one of our worst places," he told us gravely. "You'll need to brace yourselves."

The human mind is actually good at such things. It doesn't take much time to think of greatly admired people who have been wrongly locked up in the jails of the world. I already knew a dozen civic leaders in Zimbabwe with horrid tales of time in custody. Some were beaten, most often around their torsos and the soles of their feet. Some were simply held in the vile cells.

I managed to call Celia with a borrowed phone. My wife somehow knows how to all at once be emotionally distraught and serenely levelheaded. She was already strategizing about how to free me; at the same time she was getting ready to assume the newspaper's Zimbabwe coverage from Johannesburg.

"Don't worry, whatever the cells are like I can handle it," I told her, attempting a tough guy's bravado. I added a reporter's inside joke. "Really, anything is better than having to file four stories a day for the Web site."

Not long after midnight, Detective Musademba escorted Stephen and me to the jail. Electricity no longer works in much of the decrepit complex. The hallways were entirely desolate and silent but for the squeaking of our shoes and intermittent drips from exposed pipes.

At such an ominous time, my senses felt eerily deprived, except for smell. With every step, the odor of the urine-soaked lockup grew a bit stronger.

The Cell Door Slams Shut

The uniformed jailers wrote our names in a ledger and asked us to empty our pockets. I was flush with \$4,000 cash, an amount meant to last weeks in a nation where credit cards were of little use. About \$150 of that had been converted into the ludicrously inflated Zimbabwean currency; crammed in my pants were bundles of \$10 million bills that piled up four inches high.

The jailers patiently counted the sum before stashing it in a safe. There was never an attempt at a shakedown. Bribery was more on our minds than theirs. Stephen doled out \$40 for the tenuous privilege of spending our initial hours on a wooden bench in the admittance area instead of the dreaded cells.

Sleep was impossible. The bench was hard, the room cold and noisy. Near dawn, one of the bribed night crew, fearing his supervisors, roused us from the bench and hastily herded us upstairs into an unlighted empty cage.

“You can’t be found wearing your socks,” he warned urgently. “It’s not allowed. You can’t wear more than one shirt either. Hide these things.”

The heavy bars then clanged shut; a padlock clicked. We couldn’t really observe the surroundings until morning, when the first sliver of sunlight pierced the one narrow window at the ceiling.

The cell was about 7 feet wide and 15 feet deep. Three bare shelves of rough concrete extended a body’s length from both of the longer walls. Only the top slab left enough space for a person to sit upright, albeit with slouched shoulders. There was a circle of concrete in a corner to be used as a toilet. Behind it was a faucet. Stephen tried the knob. It did not work.

The floor was filthy. The odor of human waste infected the air. More bothersome were the bugs. “Cockroaches the size of skateboards,” I quipped. This was hyperbole. The insects were mostly tiny and black, others short, white and wormy. We were soon sharing our clothes with them.

About 7 a.m. the cells were emptied for “the count,” a routine taking of attendance in a large room farther upstairs. I clumsily hid my socks in my pants and buttoned one shirt to completely cover the other.

There were about 150 inmates, many of them staring our way. We were older; we were the only whites. We joined them on one side of the open room. As names were called, prisoners were obliged to acknowledge their presence and shift to the opposite wall. I parroted some of the others, using the Shona word “ndiripo” when my turn came. The gesture drew some cheers and applause. It seemed an icebreaker, and before the session was over, we were being tutored in how to say “mangwanani,” or good morning.

Prison movies had made me fear predation. But the inmates were instead a forlorn lot, a fair selection of Harare’s downtrodden, people who’d once had decent jobs and who’d now been reduced to scrounging and worse. Two of the more personable ones were car thieves. Only because their families were starving, they said. Two others, Donald and Lancelot, were accused of poaching after cutting the hindquarter off a deer that had been hit by a bus.

We mingled easily, swapping stories and comparing bug bites. Most were in a worse fix than we were. None said they’d been beaten; they weren’t political types. But few had lawyers — and many were jailed without their families knowing. This had dismal implications. The jail provided prisoners no food. If no one knew you were there, no one knew to bring you something to eat.

At breakfast, Stephen and I were allowed downstairs and pointed toward a well-stuffed wicker bag. The empathetic wife of the British ambassador had personally overseen preparation of our first meal. Sandwiches of bacon and eggs were triple-wrapped to hold their warmth. Tea, coffee, cocoa and sugar were packed in little bags to use with a thermos of hot water. There were juice boxes, soda cans, chocolate bars, hard candies and breath mints.

Neither of us had much appetite, but we were enormously grateful. Thwarted as journalists, we now had renewed purpose.

We could feed the hungry.

A Deadline Looms

It was a Friday, and Fridays held a fateful deadline. If we didn't get bail, we'd be locked away all weekend. We were relieved to be sent back to Law and Order, where we again found Beatrice Mtetwa, our lawyer.

The night before, I had wanly told her that the case against me seemed hopelessly open-and-shut. I had written articles, and anyone who Googled my name with "Zimbabwe" would have all the proof that was needed. She harrumphed at that, insisting that even a simple database search was beyond the technical expertise of the Harare police.

I now realized she might be right. The Criminal Investigations Department had only a few computers, a shortage of chairs and no functioning toilet. Detectives who earlier had seemed so competently fearsome now reminded me of the beleaguered gumshoes on "Barney Miller."

Detective Musadamba hunt-and-pecked on an antique typewriter, making triplicates with carbon paper. He'd sometimes shake away his boredom by breaking into song and pounding out the beat with the palms of his hands.

Detective Inspector Rangwani, in charge of the investigation, was lamenting his need for a copy of the updated statutes. "May I use yours?" he asked our lawyer, who took the opportunity to hector and berate him.

"This is a police state," Ms. Mtetwa said brassily. "The law is only applied when it serves the perpetuation of the state. How does it feel, Inspector Rangwani, to be used this way by the state?"

The browbeaten cop looked bedraggled, his head sagging from his neck like a wilted house plant. He replied meekly, "Madame, I agree with you and I have made a recommendation just as you have stated to drop the charges."

Suddenly, the nightmare seemed to be ending with a yielding snap of the finger. The inspector forwarded the matter to the attorney general's office, and the appropriate official there advised the police to set us free.

But there was then an odd delay, then an abrupt reversal, the pretense of a working justice system lost in a maddening flicker. "The law only applies when it serves the perpetuation of the state," Ms. Mtetwa repeated.

Two South African television technicians had been arrested the week before on similar charges. That morning, a magistrate found them not guilty. Yet instead of being released, they were rearrested. Someone in the government thought this a useful time to suppress the zeal of interfering foreign media.

Clemens Madzingo, the police's chief superintendent, himself gave us the news. He is a huge, pit bull of a man. He stood in the doorway with a triumphant grin. New charges were forthcoming, he said. Proof of our misdeeds would soon be excavated from files in our confiscated laptops.

"Until then, you'll be back in the cells."

The Hard-Liners Prevail

Things had turned badly for us; more important, things were more hapless for Zimbabwe. The government now bizarrely announced a recount of its unannounced election results. The hard-liners had apparently steeled Mr. Mugabe to fight on. In a fine Orwellian touch, they had accused the opposition of cheating. They now appeared set to finagle an election victory.

Did our incarceration somehow suit such purposes? That possibility set us into anxiety overdrive. Our wives, our editors, our embassies: they were all working hard to get us out. And while these welcome efforts supplied hope, they also left us vaguely embarrassed. If pressure could be applied on Mr. Mugabe, it ought to be for Zimbabwe's sake, not ours.

Jail, once so forbidding, now seemed merely dreary and depressing. How would we keep warm? Was there a way to get clean? When will this end?

I was fortunate to have Stephen as a comrade. I once observed that while we were amply accompanied by every sort of insect, the jail lacked rodents. “Why would rats stay here?” he responded with his wonderful dry wit. “There’s no food. They’ve left the country the same as everyone else.”

More than a quarter of Zimbabwe’s 13 million people have fled. The nation’s primary income is the cash sent home by this diaspora. Soon to follow are many inmates and guards from the jail. They wanted our phone numbers in Johannesburg — and pleaded with us not to forget them.

We had befriended a few jailers, but those who allowed us favors would end their shift, followed by jailers more stern, some wielding lengths of rubber hose. Our socks went on, our socks came off. Sometimes we were left alone; sometimes we were stuffed in with many others. I delivered a parental lecture to a young cellmate who’d cut a man with a beer bottle in a bar fight.

We continued to share our food. But even this enjoyable gesture of charity could trigger regret. During the two daily “counts,” we’d try to note who seemed hungriest: The acrobat? The peddler? The guy in the “69” T-shirt?

At meals, we were permitted to select only a few inmates to join us downstairs. A short, emaciated man in a red jersey had meekly asked to be included. “Stay close to me when they come for us,” I told him. But then I forgot.

“I was near you,” he later muttered disconsolately, “right near you.”

A Blanket, Then a Fall

Sleep escaped me. The concrete was too hard, my body too bony. I had never so craved a pad and blanket. The insects were most annoying at night. In my wakefulness, I’d pull my sleeves over my hands but then the stretched fabric exposed my midriff.

One time, when able to wander the bleak corridors, I found what once had been a bathroom, with the remnants of sinks and showers. In one corner was a heap of blankets, stiff and moldy and fetid. I was tempted to take one but they were simply too disgusting. I wasn’t yet that cold or tired.

Still, I had a fixation. Surely, a blanket was obtainable. We hadn't paid any bribes since that first night but we decided to raise the subject of contraband blankets with a favorite jailer. "Yes, this can be organized," he agreed. The next day was Sunday; stores would be closed. He'd bring them from home.

That night, we awaited his footsteps. The jail possessed no flashlights. The guard used the tentative glow from a cellphone to find the right key. "I'm sorry but one blanket is very thin," he quietly apologized. Stephen and I vied in self-sacrifice for the lesser covering, and I won with quicker hands.

The top shelf in the cell was seven feet off the ground. I climbed up and smoothed the flimsy material over the concrete, but when I stepped down I lost my balance and grabbed a swatch of fabric instead of the sturdy ledge. I tumbled sideways, my hand grasping at empty air. I bounced off one concrete slab on the opposite side and then fell flat on my back.

That was how I spent my fourth — and final — night in the Harare cells, in pain, slapping at bugs, still unable to sleep.

The Bail Hearing

Detective Musademba collected us in the morning for a bail hearing. The transport was an old pickup whose engine required a rolling start. He recruited Stephen to help push. I was excused because of my backache.

The courthouse is called Rotten Row, after a nearby street. It's a circular five-story structure built around four elaborate saucers that once fed into one another as a fountain. With the nation insolvent, there's no money to maintain either ornamentalations or courtrooms. Floors are filthy. Microphone stands have no mikes. The building's clocks are each stymied at 7:10.

Our hearing was pro forma; the magistrate released us each on bail of 300 million Zimbabwean dollars, about \$7, and the police were ordered to surrender our seized passports into the custody of the bailiffs.

The real showdown only came later, a hearing when Beatrice Mtetwa would argue we never should have been arrested at all. I sat fretfully in the "dock," the

enclosed rectangle reserved for the accused. Across the room in the witness box stood Superintendent Madzingo, the brawny police chief who'd pledged to scavenge through our incriminating laptops. What did he have?

Nothing, it turned out. He testified that "critical new evidence" had caused the attorney general's office to reverse its initial decision to let us go, a hasty fiction that was not even loitering in the rough vicinity of the truth.

When asked to provide documentation, he tendered the printout of an article scooped off my desk at York Lodge, something I'd brought to Harare as background for a possible feature article about a political candidate.

Ms. Mtetwa proceeded to hang up Mr. Madzingo like a side of beef.

"Who is the author of that article?" she asked.

The article wasn't mine. It had been written by one of the all-time-greats of The New York Times, Anthony Lewis.

"Can you tell us the date of that article?"

It was published in 1989.

Magistrate Gloria Takundwa first covered her giggles with fingers, then with the loose sleeve of her black robe.

Freedom, and Uncertainty

Beatrice Mtetwa said it was fortunate the case was before a magistrate. Most were independent, many were courageous. They were leftover gloss in Mr. Mugabe's veneer of freedom. Justice was seldom found in higher courts.

The magistrate announced her decision on April 16. While we had expected it to go our way, our minds were infused with our lawyer's admonition: the law only matters when it serves the interest of the state. We suspected that the government intended to rearrest us, which turns out to be true.

But whatever the intentions, we were better prepared. We fled quickly from Rotten Row, our car pirouetting through the streets until we were sure we weren't followed. We waited in the parking lot of a pork production plant until word came that our passports had been recovered.

Then, by prearrangement, we rendezvoused with a driver in a fully gassed car, avoiding the country's airports and heading northwest through the winding roads of the Matuzviadonha Mountains, toward the Zambezi River and a small border crossing into Zambia.

I had left the cells with a case of scabies, an infestation of microscopic mites that swelled my hands and wrists to nearly twice their size. But I am better now, back in Johannesburg, with Celia, with our sons, Max, 17, and Sam, 12.

In the meantime, Zimbabwe is beset with paroxysms of violence. Thuggery, torture and murder are familiar implements in Robert Mugabe's tool kit. Political opponents are being brutalized, as are everyday people whose voting defied him. The presidential election results are still unannounced.