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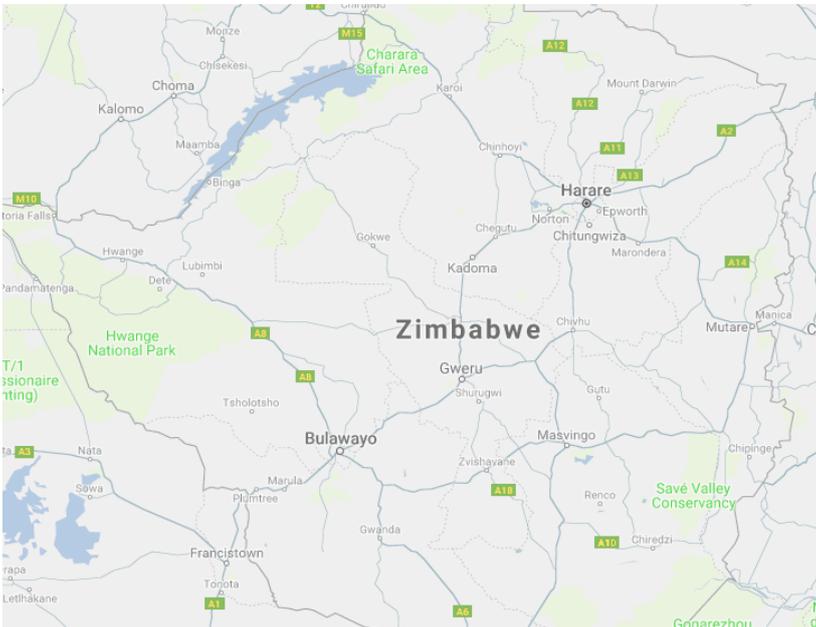
LATEST

TRAVEL ADVISORY



TRAVEL ADVISORY • 17 JANUARY 2019

Anti-government Protests Erupt Following Sharp Increase in Fuel Prices



KEY EVENTS

 **ZIMBABWE:** Moderate travel risk

 Risk of Unrest: **MODERATE**

 Political Risk: **MODERATE**

Harare; Bulawayo; urban centres: Anticipate further protests following three days of violent unrest. Disruption to public transport; communications networks likely to persist in the coming days

Zimbabwe (MODERATE) 

KEY POINTS

- Five people have been killed and tens of people have been injured following widespread and violent anti-government protests that began on 14 January following a sharp rise in the price of fuel.
- Local media sources have reported that security forces used live ammunition to disperse protesters in Bulawayo and Harare on 14-15 January and arrested over 200 people following a three-day strike called by the labour unions.
- The government forced the country's largest telecommunications provider to shut down the internet service on 15 January for two days. Protests are likely to persist in the coming days.

SITUATIONAL SUMMARY

Violent anti-government protests broke out in Harare, Bulawayo and other Zimbabwean cities following a television announcement by President Emmerson Mnangagwa that gasoline and diesel prices would increase by as much as 100% due to nationwide fuel shortages. The deteriorating economic situation and ongoing currency crisis has made it increasingly difficult for Zimbabwean importers to secure foreign currency to purchase fuel. In response to the announcement, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions called for a nationwide strike to be held.

Protests erupted on 14 January in most major cities leading to a forceful response by security forces. Local media reports indicate that police fired tear gas and live ammunition towards large groups and videos have circulated of armed and uniformed men entering hospitals to detain injured protesters. Protests continued for the third consecutive day on 16 January as protesters took part in a national 'stayaway' where people stayed at home rather than coming to work, disrupting services through the country. Local reports suggest that security forces went house to house to arrest prominent religious leaders and activists who had backed the national stay away.

In response to the unrest, the government forced the main telecommunications company to shut down the internet for 36 hours. While the internet has now been restored, social media and free messaging applications remain blocked. Major disruption has been reported in Harare, Bulawayo and Mutare as businesses, banks and schools remain closed and public transport has stopped running. While the major airports, including Harare International (HRE) and Victoria Falls Airport (VFA), remain open and international carriers continue to operate flights, several national carriers have announced they have cancelled all flights until at least 22 January.

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The November 2017 coup that ousted long-term authoritarian leader Mugabe promised reform that would end the corruption and nepotism that had plagued Zimbabwe and contributed to the longstanding poverty plaguing the country. During the July election now-President Mnangagwa also promised economic reform and end to the Mugabe era corruption. However, Zimbabwe politics has quickly reverted to familiar Mugabe-like tactics. Little has been done to stimulate the economy and improve living standards. US sanctions alongside a shortage of foreign currency have resulted in skyrocketing inflation, reaching a ten-year high, wiping out the savings of Zimbabweans and forcing up the price of basic commodities. The aggressive reaction by the security forces to the unrest, attempting to silence any form of opposition, has further cemented the belief amongst sections of the opposition that Mnangagwa is proving to be an extension of the Mugabe era rather than a break from it.

Protest that began on the 14 January were triggered by the sharp increase in fuel prices but have quickly developed into strong opposition to the government and its failure to meet the promises pledged during the election period. The governments reaction has been to suppress this opposition rather than address the concerns of those protesting. Over 200 arrest have been made, targeting high profile union representatives, political activists and religious leaders who are openly calling for protests. An internet blackout imposed on the 15 January stopped the spread of information on abuses being committed by the security forces but has opened the government up to accusations that have sought to suppress information being shared via the media.

On 16 January, unions and activists called for a 'national stayaway', a day when instead of protesting, people stayed at home and did not go to work. Major cities were brought to a standstill and critical services were severely disrupted. Mnangagwa, who is currently out of the country on a state visit in Russia, condemned the protests and remarked that it was a sad day for Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe's economic situation, which is driving the unrest, has left the government with very little options on how to respond to the protests. The violent response by security forces is in part, due to the fact they have no resources to respond to the problem. Mnangagwa will be in Davos for the World Economic Forum next week attempting to build economic partnerships with other countries however, the recent unrest will do little to encourage bilateral investment. Economic desperation is likely to embolden political opposition and protesters in the coming weeks and it is likely that recent protests are only the beginning of the instability. Zimbabwe will be a key country to watch out for in 2019.

In consideration of the current situation, it is likely that protests will continue for the short term before they start to burn out. This said, countrywide unrest is likely to become a more permanent fixture of the travel security environment as the socio-economic root causes that led to the wave of protests will continue to be unmet.

Travellers should carefully consider whether travel to Harare is business critical at the current time and consider postponing their trip until protests end. For those in country, it is important to stay up to date with local developments and planned protests through the media, local contacts and Solace Global Alerts. Anticipate the closure to critical service including public transport and banking institutes as well as disruption to the internet and telecommunication networks. If you find yourself in the vicinity of a protest immediately leave the area and return to a safe location.

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SECURITY ADVICE

HIGH CIVIL UNREST RISK 

- In-country staff should minimise near potential protest flashpoints in the coming days due to the credible threat posed by clashes between demonstrators and security forces.
- Review evacuation plans to ensure they are up to date, realistic and can be implemented at short notice. Consider how you will rapidly assemble staff in a central and secure location especially if they are working in remote locations.
- Travellers should stay up to date with the latest information, especially regarding political demonstrations. Consult local media, in country contacts and Solace Global Alerts for details of any planned or ongoing demonstrations in your area.
- Periodically test all communication strategies (multiple communication means will be required including satellite phone) and ensure you have the capability to quickly communicate with staff on the ground. Internet providers and telephone networks are likely to be intermittently disabled in the coming days.
- Significant traffic disruption is likely near protest flashpoints, on major routes and around key transport and business hubs. Plan routes circumventing areas prone to unrest, alternatively allow additional time if travel through affected areas is unavoidable.
- Anticipate heightened security in urban centres, at protest locations and in the vicinity of government buildings. Exercise vigilance and if people start gathering in a location; leave the area immediately and return to a safe location.
- Always carry personal identification and travel documentation in case you need to transit through a checkpoint.



Solace Global remains available to provide the full range of Travel Risk Management services to clients. Solace Global is also able to provide comprehensive crisis management, in-country journey management, tracking, response, and evacuation services.

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