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INVESTIGATION | Poisoned by Trust

They trusted the water. Now they're fighting for justice.

By Charles Mafa

Every few weeks, dozens of former Lumwana Mine employees gather under a modest outdoor shelter in Solwezi, northwestern Zambia. Some arrive quietly carrying medical records, while others exchange updates on a lawsuit they hope will finally provide answers. No longer colleagues at work, they are now plaintiffs in one of Zambia's most closely watched workplace health cases, united by a belief that the water they drank while at work made them ill.

At the front of the recent gathering attended by MakanDay in Solwezi stands their chairman, Mbuyi Sambondu. He urges the former workers to remain united as they await the outcome of a lawsuit filed in the High Court in September last year against Lumwana Mining Company, operated by Barrick Mining Corporation.

The lawsuit, brought on behalf of 193 former employees, alleges that the workers were exposed to uranium-contaminated drinking water during their employment, resulting in serious health problems, loss of employment and other harm. The allegations are contained in court documents reviewed by MakanDay and have not yet been proven in court.

Before publication, MakanDay invited Barrick Mining Corporation to respond to questions about the November 2023 incident, including its public statements, water quality monitoring systems and other matters of corporate policy that were not directly before the High Court. The company declined to comment, saying the matter is currently before the court.

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COURT REPORT | Three Jailed Seven Years for Elephant Poaching in Sioma Ngwezi National Park

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Former Zambia Medicine Agency Director General Challenges Dismissal in Court

By MakanDay Reporter

The Industrial Relations Court has commenced hearing a case in which former Zambia Medicines and Medical Supplies Agency (ZAMMSA) Director General Victor Nyasulu is challenging his dismissal, alleging that it was unfair, unlawful and wrongful.

The matter came up for trial on 30 July 2026 before Hon. Mr. Justice Egispo Mwansa, sitting in chambers, after court-directed arbitration failed to resolve the dispute.

Nyasulu, the claimant, is represented by Reagan Blankfein Gates Legal Practitioners, while ZAMMSA, the respondent, is represented by D. Kalima and Company Legal Practitioners.

During the hearing, the trial formally commenced, with Nyasulu taking the witness stand to give evidence in support of his claim.

The court adjourned the matter to 15 April 2027 for continuation of the trial. The respondent is expected to begin presenting its evidence at the next hearing.

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The case raises broader questions about workplace safety, environmental monitoring and corporate accountability in one of Zambia's most important economic sectors.

While the High Court will determine the disputed facts in this case, the issues it raises sit within a broader national conversation about balancing Zambia's economic dependence on mining with the protection of workers and the environment.

For the former workers, however, the lawsuit is about something more personal. They say they trusted the water their employer provided every day, believing it was safe to drink. Today, they are asking the courts to determine whether that trust was misplaced.

Mining remains one of Zambia's most important industries. According to the Zambia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (ZEITI), the extractive sector contributed 25% of Zambia's total government revenue and 74% of the country's exports in 2024, underscoring the sector's importance to the national economy.

Lumwana Mine is one of the country's largest copper operations and among its major taxpayers. ZEITI records show that the mine paid approximately ZMW 3.9 billion to government institutions in 2023, making it one of Zambia's largest contributors to public revenue.

The same report shows that Lumwana contributed more than US$1 million to Zambia's Environmental Protection Fund in 2024, a statutory fund established to support environmental management and mine rehabilitation.

ZEITI also outlines Zambia's environmental governance framework, under which mining operations are subject to oversight by institutions including the Zambia Environmental Management Agency (ZEMA), the Mine Safety Department and other regulators.

These statutory payments and regulatory requirements form part of Zambia's broader mining governance framework and should not be interpreted as evidence supporting or refuting the allegations currently before the High Court.

Against that backdrop, legal challenges involving major mining companies are relatively uncommon and closely watched because they raise questions not only about the circumstances alleged by the parties, but also about how workplace safety, environmental oversight and corporate accountability operate in one of Zambia's most economically significant industries.

For years, the former employees say, drinking water supplied at the mine was simply part of everyday working life. Before each shift, workers filled bottles from taps around the Incoming Pre-Shift (IPS) area without questioning its safety.

According to the Statement of Claim, that confidence changed dramatically in November 2023 when an internal memorandum was allegedly circulated beyond its intended recipients. The plaintiffs claim the memorandum disclosed that drinking water supplied from Chimiwungo Crossing Dam contained uranium. They say the information came as a shock, particularly to workers who had already been experiencing unexplained health problems over several years.

According to the court documents, Lumwana Mining Company began supplying drinking water from Chimiwungo Crossing Dam in 2012 through a water distribution system owned and operated by the mine.

The plaintiffs further allege that from around 2015, increasing numbers of workers began suffering illnesses that resulted in medical discharges, voluntary separations, resignations and employment terminations. These allegations remain contested and will ultimately be determined by the High Court.

Central to the lawsuit are laboratory test results dated 16 November 2023, which the plaintiffs rely upon in support of their claims. According to the Statement of Claim, the tests recorded uranium concentrations ranging from 0.04 to 0.19 milligrams per litre.

The plaintiffs contend that these levels exceeded what they describe as the maximum permissible limit of 0.03 milligrams per litre for drinking water. Whether those test results are accurate, what they demonstrate, and whether they establish liability remain matters for determination by the court.

The Statement of Claim further alleges that Lumwana Mining Company was negligent by sourcing drinking water from a dam surrounded by waste rock dumps, failing to prevent surface runoff and underground seepage from entering the water source, and allowing dust and rock debris generated during blasting to settle in an uncovered reservoir supplying drinking water to employees.

Those allegations have not yet been tested in court.

According to the Statement of Claim, the plaintiffs allege that 41 former employees were medically discharged, 51 accepted voluntary separation packages, four resigned from employment, while several others continue receiving medical treatment.

The plaintiffs further allege that one former employee died, with the lawsuit attributing the death to complications they believe were linked to uranium exposure. That allegation remains disputed and has not been determined by the High Court.

The former workers are asking the court to issue declarations of negligence and award compensation, special damages and other relief.

The case centres on Lumwana Mine, located about 65 kilometres west of Solwezi in North-Western Province. Copper production began in 2008, and Barrick Mining Corporation became the operator after acquiring Equinox Minerals in 2011. According to ZEITI, Lumwana remains one of Zambia's largest copper producers and one of the country's leading contributors to government revenue, reflecting its strategic importance to both the mining industry and the national economy.

In addition to its extensive copper reserves, the Lumwana orebody has long been known to contain naturally occurring uranium mineralisation. Previous geological and feasibility studies have identified uranium-bearing zones within both the Chimiwungo and Malundwe deposits. The existence of naturally occurring uranium within the orebody is not, by itself, evidence that drinking water supplied to workers was unsafe. That question forms part of the issues now before the High Court.

Under Zambia's civil justice system, allegations contained in a Statement of Claim represent the plaintiffs' case. They remain subject to response by the defendant and, ultimately, determination by the court based on the evidence presented.

Back under the shelter in Solwezi, the meeting comes to an end. Some of the former workers climb onto bicycles while others begin the long walk home. For now, the answers they seek will not come from the discussions held beneath the shelter, but from a courtroom where the evidence, the company's response and the workers' allegations will be tested before a judge.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), prolonged exposure to sufficiently high levels of uranium may affect the kidneys, with the health impact depending on the amount, duration and route of exposure. Whether any illnesses alleged by the plaintiffs are linked to the exposure claimed in this case is one of the issues that remains before the High Court.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This report is based in part on documents filed in the High Court of Zambia. The allegations described are those made by the plaintiffs in ongoing civil proceedings. They are contested, have not been proven in court, and remain subject to determination by the High Court.

COURT REPORT | Three Jailed Seven Years for Elephant Poaching in Sioma Ngwezi National Park

From page 1

By Gibson Zulu

Three men have been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment after admitting to illegally possessing elephant ivory, elephant meat, a firearm and ammunition in Zambia's Sioma Ngwezi National Park, one of the country's most important wildlife conservation areas.

The convictions come as conservation authorities warn that illegal hunting continues to threaten years of efforts to rebuild wildlife populations in the vast protected landscape.

According to the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW), the three men appeared before Senior Resident Magistrate Chipego Phiri at the Senanga Subordinate Court on 20 July 2026, where they pleaded guilty to multiple wildlife-related offences.

In a statement issued, DNPW identified the convicted men as Pumulo Libwenta (48), Malandiso Malikiso (45), and Twambo Liwanga (47).

The trio was arrested on 27 June 2026 during an anti-poaching operation inside Sioma Ngwezi National Park in Western Province.

Authorities said officers recovered two pairs of elephant ivory, 96 kilogrammes of elephant meat, a .375 rifle and ammunition from the suspects.

A fourth suspect, Samboma Silumbu (30), pleaded not guilty to the charges. His trial is scheduled to begin on 31 July 2026.

The four men were charged under the Zambia Wildlife Act with unlawful possession of a prescribed trophy, unlawful possession of a protected trophy, unlawful possession of a firearm and unlawful possession of ammunition.

For the three who admitted the offences, the court imposed seven years' imprisonment for unlawful possession of elephant ivory, five years for unlawful possession of elephant meat, and two years each for unlawful possession of a firearm and ammunition.

The sentences will run concurrently, meaning each offender will serve an effective prison term of seven years.

DNPW said the case highlights the continued threat posed by wildlife crime despite conservation gains made in Sioma Ngwezi National Park, Zambia's third-largest national park and home to elephants, lions, leopards, cheetahs and African wild dogs.

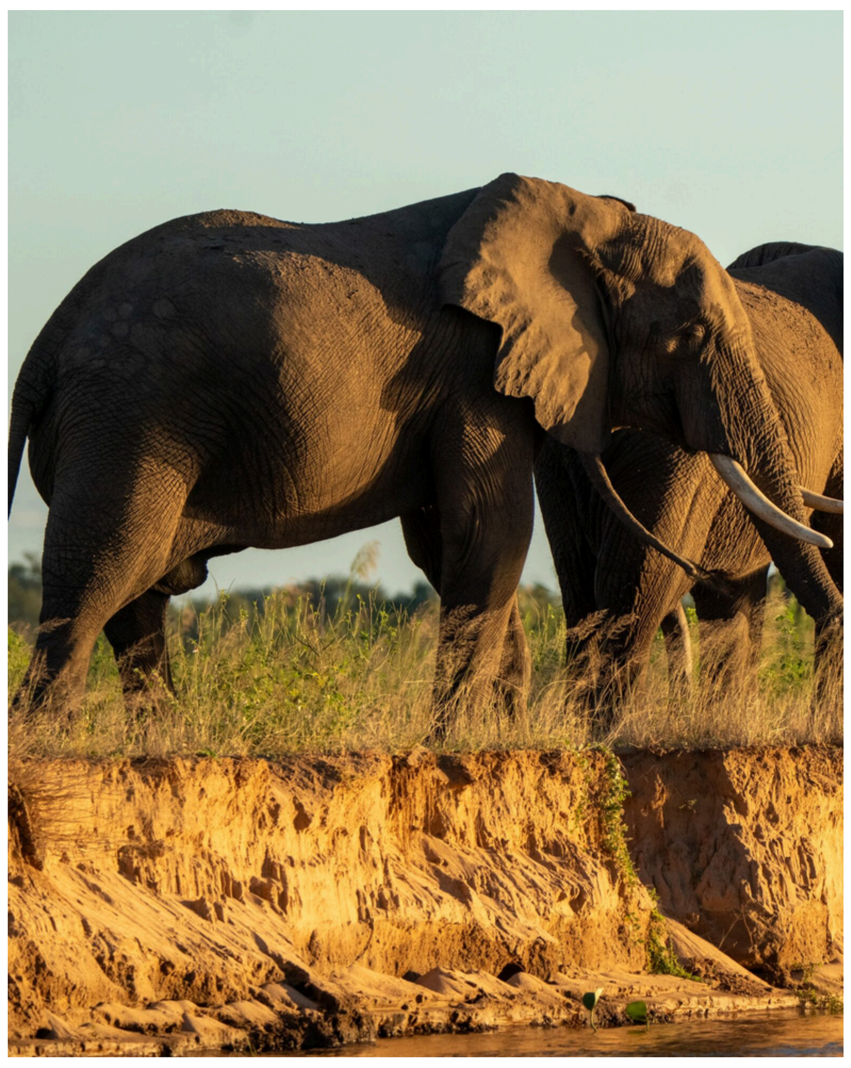
The department noted that wildlife populations in the park have shown signs of recovery following years of intensified protection efforts, but warned that poaching remains a significant challenge.

"The illegal killing of elephants is particularly damaging. Beyond the loss of individual animals, elephants are ecosystem engineers that shape landscapes and play a significant role in supporting Zambia's tourism industry and the livelihoods that depend on it," DNPW said.

The department called for continued collaboration between law enforcement agencies, conservation partners, the judiciary and the public to combat wildlife crime.

It also urged members of the public to report suspected wildlife offences to the Department of National Parks and Wildlife or the Zambia Police Service.

Gibson Zulu is a fellow under the Wildlife Crime Prevention (WCP) environmental fellowship for journalists.



OPINION | Politics of the Plate, Not the People

Every election season in Zambia brings with it a familiar script. New slogans are coined, campaign songs fill the airwaves, rallies attract enthusiastic crowds, and politicians promise that this time things will be different.

Yet when the dust settles and a new government takes office, many of the conversations remain exactly where they were five years earlier.
We are still debating the same issues. Social Cash Transfer. Farmer Input Support Programme (FISP). Youth empowerment. Constituency Development Fund (CDF). Fertiliser distribution. Mealie meal prices. Fuel costs. Unemployment.

These are undoubtedly important issues. Millions of Zambians depend on these programmes, and they deserve to be managed effectively. But one cannot help asking a difficult question: why do our elections revolve around the same promises every five years? If every government claims success, why do the same challenges dominate every campaign?

The problem may not simply be policy. It may be our politics.

Too often, politics in Zambia appears to have become a contest over who gets access to the national table rather than who has the best ideas for growing it. Winning office is frequently treated as the ultimate achievement, not the beginning of public service. Political competition can become less about transforming the country and more about controlling opportunities, appointments and resources.

This perception is reinforced whenever political defections are followed by appointments, when public debates focus more on personalities than policy, or when citizens see politicians living increasingly comfortable lives while ordinary people continue to struggle with rising living costs.

Of course, not every politician enters public office for personal gain. Zambia has many dedicated leaders who genuinely serve their communities. To paint everyone with the same brush would be unfair. But public confidence is shaped not by the intentions of a few, but by the conduct of the political class as a whole

Perhaps this explains why voter apathy continues to grow among some citizens. Many no longer ask which party has the better vision. Instead, they ask whether anything will really change regardless of who wins.

As Zambia approaches another election, perhaps it is time to raise the standard of our political conversation. Instead of asking who will increase Social Cash Transfer or distribute more fertiliser, we should also be asking deeper questions.

How will the next government create enough jobs so fewer families depend on cash transfers in the first place? How will it improve the quality of education so young people compete in a changing global economy? What concrete plans exist to industrialise Zambia, diversify exports, strengthen local manufacturing and increase productivity? How will public institutions become more accountable and less dependent on the goodwill of individual leaders?

These are the conversations that shape prosperous nations.

Democracy is not simply about changing leaders every five years. It is about demanding better leadership every day. Elections should not merely determine who occupies State House or Parliament. They should determine the direction of the country for generations to come.

Ultimately, the responsibility does not rest with politicians alone. Citizens also have a role to play. When voters reward slogans over substance or personalities over performance, they reinforce a political culture that values short-term promises above long-term solutions.

Perhaps the greatest question before Zambia this election is not who deserves to govern

OPINION | Politics of the Plate, Not the People cont...

It is whether we, as voters, are prepared to demand a different kind of politics—one centred on service rather than privilege, on ideas rather than handouts, and on building a nation where success is measured not by how much those in power have gained, but by how much the lives of ordinary Zambians have improved.

Until that happens, we may continue to change governments without changing the country.

INVESTIGATION | Childhood on the Clock: Poverty Is Pushing Isoka's Children Out of School and Into Work

By Richard Simbaya

Over three days, MakanDay observed numerous children working in restaurants, market stalls and small shops across Isoka. Some appeared to be as young as 12. Most were not formally employed. Instead, they worked in exchange for food, accommodation or small informal payments.

By seven o'clock each morning, the sounds of Isoka's main market fill the air. Metal pots clang against concrete floors. Customers negotiate prices. Restaurant workers hurry between charcoal stoves and crowded tables.

Among them is 13-year-old Aaron.

His real name has been withheld to protect his identity.

Instead of sitting in a Grade Seven classroom, Aaron spends his days washing dishes, carrying heavy buckets of water, cleaning tables and serving customers. He begins work before sunrise. He leaves long after sunset.

Listen to the full story

https://youtu.be/YbucQGFVwBY?si=8stsJ292XrZkmH3m

This Week in the Bulletin and Record

COMMENT

"We won't pay – it's the culture"

A dangerous syndrome is threatening the livelihoods of many workers and retirees in the Zambia. That syndrome is, as the headline says, "We won't pay – it's the culture".

In the last few months, stories have appeared in the Zambian media concerning private companies and public institutions that have either failed to pay workers' salaries for many months or have retrenched workers without paying them their dues.

Recently, workers at the Zambia Institute of Management, ZAMIM, downed their tools because they had not been paid their salaries for over 20 months. A public service retiree cried openly on one of the privately-owned television stations while pleading for his pension benefits.

A former Local Court magistrate based in Luwingu in the Northern Province is still chasing his gratuity seven years after retirement. In the process, the man has gone blind and he has requested his relatives to chase for his payment here in Lusaka. The signs are that he is not likely to get his benefits because there are hundreds more like him.

Many councils in the country have not paid their workers for years and no one seems to care because failure to pay workers in Zambia appears to be a normal thing. Everyone does it, it has become a culture – "we will not pay".

The syndrome has spread like a malignant tumor. No one wants to pay. People want water, but they do not want to pay. Every month, the water utilities have to disconnect water before people will pay their dues. The electricity company is in similar trouble, consumers, including government departments, do not want to pay.

Equally affected are private businesses providing services. Their customers owe them huge sums, and their operations are negatively affected as a result.

The worst sin however, is the refusal by employers to pay workers dues particularly after retrenchment or retirement.
One might understand if this nasty syndrome was restricted to the public service and statutory institutions because workers in the public sector are partly to blame for their plight: their laziness and corruption robs their employer, the government, of massive amounts of revenue.

But the private sector is suffering the same syndrome. Employers of all shades are routinely failing to pay workers' dues when they retire or they are retrenched.

Some of the bigger multinational companies are even engaged in corporate frauds involving their pension schemes. Three major banks and an oil company are in court defending charges of fraudulent handling of their staff pension schemes.
All three banks have lost cases in the Supreme Court of Zambia but they have just said 'we will not pay – it's the culture'.

Even some foreign-owned pension fund managers are in collusion with private sector employers in abusing workers' pension rights. In one case involving a multinational company and a foreign-owned fund manager, the pension administrator unashamedly gave false evidence with distorted facts to protect the financial interests of both the employer and the fund manager.

The retirement age in Zambia is 55 years, but pensioners are made to wait for many more years before they receive their benefits that they toiled for over so many years – that is, if they're lucky to receive their pensions at all.

An example of this situation is the BP Zambia pension case which went into court in 2002 and is still unresolved nearly 14 years later. The case started with 235 plaintiffs and so far 89 have died without receiving their benefits.

"We won't pay – it's the culture" cont...

The average age of the surviving plaintiffs is about 61. Some are as old as 70, which means that their pension benefits have been delayed by between six to 15 years.

Tragically for Zambian workers, the Zambian judicial system is prone to abuse. The multinational companies have lots of money and they exploit the slovenly and decadent system to delay settlement. If they lose cases in the Supreme Court, they go back for assessment to the Deputy Registrars. If they lose at assessment, they appeal again to the Supreme Court. It's a vicious cycle of corruption and exploitation.

Zambian Courts do not appear to care how long it takes for workers to get justice, and in doing so they adopt the 'we will not pay syndrome'. Zamtel workers won their case in the Supreme Court in 2011. Assessment finished some six months ago and not a single ngwee has been paid to any of the workers to date. Zamtel has not even given any indication of when they expect to pay.

The Zamtel workers' benefits were miscalculated during the sale of the company to LAP Green of Libya in 2010. The workers tried to reason with their former employers who refused to follow the rules and conditions of service. The matter went to court, the workers won, assessment finished and the employer is refusing to pay. No one is raising any eyebrows because "it's the culture – we will not pay'.

The HSSE (House Safety Security and Environment) policies of these employers sing of good governance. The multinationals in particular boast of being good corporate citizens, but they shamefully exploit the decadence of Zambia's governance institutions.

There is only one governance institution which can stop this horrible culture - the judiciary. It must institute a process of dealing with employment-related litigations expeditiously. There will be no need to create special courts. It is a mere administrative matter. Fast track such cases, allot them a time-defined procedure and apply the enforcement procedures and powers that already exist in the system.

Passive endorsement of the 'we will not pay culture' by the judiciary is a time bomb. Victims pass on their poverty, anger and frustration to their children. The national economy suffers. There is a ripple effect throughout the lives of families and the result is social collapse.

* The writer is a veteran journalist.

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