

MAKANDAY
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Sino Metals Seeks to Triple Waste Storage Capacity as Toxic Spill Case Continues

From page 1
By Charles Mafa

The Supreme Court has adjourned until November an appeal by Sino Metals Leach Zambia Limited against a High Court decision allowing a constitutional petition by 177 residents affected by the February 2025 toxic spill to proceed.

The adjournment followed an application by the State, through the Attorney General’s office, seeking more time for the parties to continue negotiations aimed at reaching an out-of-court settlement.

Sino Metals, a subsidiary of the state-owned China Nonferrous Metal Mining Group (CNMC), did not oppose the application. Its lawyers, Chibesakunda & Company, told the court they had no objection to the adjournment. The petitioners, however, opposed the State’s request.

The petitioners are represented by Malambo and Company Advocates and Lusitu Chambers.

The constitutional petition seeks to hold Sino Metals accountable for the environmental, economic and social consequences of the spill, which residents say destroyed crops, polluted water sources and disrupted their livelihoods.

The court proceedings come as Sino Metals seeks regulatory approval to increase the capacity of another waste storage facility at its Chambishi operations from about 1.84 million to 5.48 million cubic metres — almost three times its current capacity.

A three-member panel of Supreme Court judges — Deputy Chief Justice Michael Musonda, Justice Fulgency Mwenya Chisanga and Justice Roydah Mwanakulya Chinungi Kaoma — suspended proceedings for more than two hours while meeting the lawyers in chambers. When the court reconvened, the judges adjourned the case.

On 3 June, a three-member panel of the Supreme Court — Deputy Chief Justice Michael Musonda, Justice Nigel Mutuna and Justice Fulgency Mwenya Chisanga — sitting in Kabwe, Central Province, held that the Government, as custodian of the public interest,

should be heard before the appeal could proceed because the issues raised extended beyond the parties directly involved.

The Supreme Court subsequently allowed the Government to join the case as an intervener on 18 August in Lusaka. The court emphasised the State’s role in representing the public interest, including the interests of citizens affected by the spill.

The Supreme Court proceedings centre on an appeal by Sino Metals against a High Court decision allowing a constitutional petition filed by 177 affected residents to proceed. The petition also names NFC Africa Mining Plc, within whose mining area the tailings dams were located, as a respondent.

A sizeable group of the 177 petitioners, including old women from Kalusale community in Kalulushi district near the mining city of Kitwe on Zambia’s Copperbelt, attended the latest proceedings. Their appearance in court came slightly more than a year after the toxic waste spill devastated farms, contaminated water sources and disrupted livelihoods in their community.

Sino Metals and NFC Africa Mining are mining companies operating in Chambishi, Kalulushi District. Sino Metals’ operations — including an open-pit mine, concentrator plant and tailings storage dams — are located within NFC Africa Mining’s surface rights area and plant boundary.

At the centre of the dispute is the February 2025 collapse of multiple mining waste dams, which released large quantities of acidic and toxic waste into the nearby Chambishi Stream, Mwambashi River and the wider Kafue River system.

Environmental experts and affected communities have described the spill as one of Zambia’s most serious mining-related environmental disasters in recent decades.

The court proceedings come as Sino Metals seeks regulatory approval to substantially expand an existing tailings storage facility at its Chambishi operations.

The Zambia Environmental Management Agency



Kalusale residents outside the court following the adjournment of the case.

(ZEMA) is reviewing an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment submitted by the company for the proposed expansion of its existing TD15G tailings storage facility.

TD15G is not the same facility that failed in February 2025, triggering the toxic waste spill now at the centre of the litigation. In a statement to parliament following the disaster, the government identified the failed facility as TD15F. ZEMA’s environmental documentation, meanwhile, shows that TD15G was constructed between May 2023 and December 2024 and became operational in January 2026.

Sino Metals is proposing to expand TD15G’s storage capacity from about 1.84 million cubic metres to 5.48 million cubic metres — almost three times its existing capacity. The facility’s footprint would increase from about 13 hectares to 47 hectares, equivalent to an expansion from 0.13 to 0.47 square kilometres, or roughly 66 football pitches at its proposed size.



The expanded facility, known as TD15G-1, would reach a maximum height of 22.5 metres — about the height of a seven-storey building — and have an expected lifespan of 10 years.

The proposal has drawn concern from the Zambia Environmental Justice Coalition (ZEJC), a grouping of civil society and environmental organisations that includes Transparency International Zambia, Caritas Zambia, Conservation Advocates Zambia, Zambia Alliance of Women, ActionAid, Wildlife Crime Prevention, NGO WASH Forum, BirdWatch Zambia, Publish What You Pay Zambia and Environment Africa, among others.

The coalition has called on ZEMA to withhold approval of the expansion until critical safety and environmental information is complete, publicly available and independently scrutinised.

From page 1

Kabwata’s Mystery Builders

The illegal construction of 18 structures in parts of Kabwata echoes a pattern seen during the Patriotic Front’s time in government, when party cadres were accused of putting up structures without authorisation.

This time, the Lusaka City Council demolished the structures. But the demolition has not answered the key questions: What happens to those who commissioned the construction? Who paid for it? And how were the structures allowed to be built on road reserves before the authorities intervened?

By Gibson Zulu

One morning, residents of Kabwata, east of Lusaka’s central business district, woke up to find parts of their neighbourhood transformed into construction sites. Some of the new structures had been erected directly beneath ZESCO power lines near the junction of Nationalist and Tokyo Way roads.

Someone had bought the building materials. Someone had hired the workers. And, presumably, someone expected to benefit once construction was complete.

Yet, after the structures were demolished, the council says it cannot reliably identify the people behind their construction.

Before the demolition, MakanDay had asked the council to establish who initiated or financed the developments and how construction had been able to proceed.

The council confirmed that it could not reliably identify the people behind the construction. However, one resident alleged that those involved appeared to have used connections to the ruling party and political influence to facilitate the developments.

MakanDay contacted the UPND for comment on the allegation and asked whether any of its officials or members were connected to the developments. The party had not responded by the time of publication.

Council Deputy Public Relations Officer Bulumba Nyambe said some of those involved might themselves have been sold land illegally.

As Lusaka expands, so does pressure on land needed for roads and other public infrastructure. When developments encroach on land reserved for such purposes, but observers say

demolishing them may solve the immediate problem. It does not explain how they got there – or why they were not stopped earlier.

A resident raises the alarm

In Kabwata, it took a resident’s complaint and media pressure to bring the developments to the council’s attention.

Helena Nyatanga Chibwe said she had visited the Town Clerk’s office to raise concerns about the construction. The council subsequently sent two officers to inspect the area.

According to Nyambe, officials found boundary walls, mobile-money booths and a car wash among the structures. Some had been constructed along road reserves, while others were located along Tokyo Way, near Ring Road and Nationalist Road.

What remains unclear is why no action was taken against the people found carrying out the construction, despite their failure to comply with the council’s instruction to stop and remove the structures.

For one of the residents, Chibwe, however, knocking them down answered only half the question.

“Yes, the council has demolished these infrastructures, but they need to tell us who was building those structures,” she told MakenDay.

Plenty of workers, but who was the boss?

Before the demolition, MakenDay visited the area and found construction underway. Young men and women were carrying blocks and doing building work. One worker told MakenDay they were being paid and expected to receive the balance once the work was completed.

One of the residents told MakenDay that the workers were not known in the community and appeared to have been brought in from elsewhere.

MakenDay has asked LCC to establish who was behind the developments. One resident said that while the council had

dealt with the most visible problem by demolishing the structures, the bigger questions remained unanswered.

“What it has not explained is who put them there in the first place — and how construction was able to proceed under the council’s watch,” she said.

Entries Open for the MakenDay Investigative Reporting Award

Now in its fifth year, the Eminent Prize for Investigative Journalism celebrates **Zambian journalists whose reporting goes beyond the headlines to expose corruption, abuse of power and injustice.**

Entries close: 31 October 2026

An independent panel of judges will review the submissions and select up to two winners.

What’s at stake?

- **Overall Winner:** A brand-new laptop
- **Runner-up:** A fully paid internship at MakenDay
- **Honourable Mentions:** Up to two outstanding entries may receive special recognition, with the journalists invited to MakenDay’s awards ceremony.

Winning and finalist investigations will also be showcased on the MakenDay website and across our social media platforms, giving exceptional investigative journalism greater visibility.

Who can enter?

The award is open to journalists based in Zambia, including MakenDay contributors. However, journalists employed by MakenDay are not eligible to enter.

Entries should demonstrate strong investigative reporting by uncovering information of significant public interest, particularly reporting that exposes corruption, abuse of power, wrongdoing or injustice.

Journalists may submit their own work or nominate another journalist’s work with their permission.

Submission Guidelines

Eligible work must have been published or broadcast between 1 December 2025 and 31 October 2026.

Entries published or broadcast in languages other than English must be accompanied by an English translation.

For print or written entries, submit a scanned or digital copy. Where the text is difficult to read, include a transcript in Word or PDF format.

For radio, television or online video entries, provide a working link or attach the relevant audio or video file.

Every submission must include a short biography and photograph of the entrant or entrants.

Ready to enter?

Send your submission to editor@makanday.org by 31 October 2026.

Visit the MakenDay website for more information.

Great investigations deserve to be recognised. If your journalism uncovered what others wanted hidden, we want to see it.

From page 1

Zambia puts geological records online as only 58% of country fully mapped

By Gibson Zulu

The Ministry of Mines and Minerals Development has put decades of geological information online as the government seeks to close gaps in the country’s mineral mapping and make it easier to identify areas with potential mineral deposits.

According to Assistant Director for Regional Mapping in the Geological Survey Department (GSD) Chaanza Chifwepa only about 58 percent of Zambia has been covered by conventional geological mapping, leaving significant parts of the country without detailed field-based geological information.

At the same time, a separate high-resolution aerial geophysical survey, designed to provide a broader picture of the rocks beneath the country, had reached 94.2 percent completion at the time of his interview.

Chifwepa said improved geological information could help government, investors and miners better understand Zambia’s mineral potential, particularly as the country seeks to diversify beyond copper into minerals such as lithium, nickel, manganese, graphite and rare earth elements.

He was speaking during the Ministry of Mines Podcast on Wednesday, 23 September 2026.

Decades of records go digital

For years, much of Zambia’s geological information—including maps, exploration reports, geophysical records and geochemical results—was stored in paper archives.

“Much of that information was archival and in paper form,” Chifwepa said. “So what this digitisation programme helps us do is to protect these records from physical deterioration and makes it easier for you to be able to search and combine.”

The department has now digitised the records and created the GSD Digital Store, where approved geological maps, reports and historical exploration information can be accessed electronically.

“All of that scanned archival data and all this information is actually online,” Chifwepa said.

The digital store is expected to form part of a wider national geoscientific information system, which will eventually bring together geological, geochemical and geophysical information.

Chifwepa said putting the information into digital formats would also make it easier to analyse using emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence.

“The more digital it is, the more usable, AI ready it is for actual interpretative type of work,” he said.

Mapping does not mean finding a mine

Chifwepa cautioned that geological mapping does not automatically mean commercially viable mineral deposits have been discovered.

Regional geological maps help scientists and exploration companies understand the types, ages and structures of rocks in different parts of the country and identify areas that warrant further investigation.

“By virtue of having mineral occurrences is not a guarantee that you have a resource,” he said.

Mining companies must still carry out detailed exploration, including soil sampling, geophysical investigations and drilling, before determining whether a mineral deposit exists in quantities that can be commercially mined.

The GSD’s role, Chifwepa said, is to provide the initial information that reduces uncertainty and helps investors decide where more detailed exploration may be worthwhile.

“Our information de-risks,” he said, describing geological information as an early stage in reducing exploration risk and attracting investment.

Aerial survey nearing completion

While conventional geological mapping stands at about 58 percent, Chifwepa said the

country’s high-resolution aerial geophysical survey had reached 94.2 percent completion.

The survey uses aircraft-mounted equipment to measure physical properties of rocks beneath the surface, including magnetic, radiometric and gravity characteristics.

The current survey uses flight lines about 300 metres apart, compared with approximately one kilometre during earlier nationwide surveys conducted in the 1970s.

Once the aerial survey is completed, Chifwepa said the data will undergo quality checks, processing and interpretation before being used to identify areas requiring more detailed field mapping, sampling and ground surveys.

Potential benefit for small-scale miners

The department also hopes better access to geological information will help artisanal and small-scale miners, many of whom operate with limited knowledge of the geology beneath their mining areas.

Chifwepa said inadequate geological information can contribute to unsafe mining, poor mineral recovery, wasted investment and environmental damage.

The GSD can provide miners with geological assessments, geochemical and geophysical surveys, laboratory testing and mineral identification services.

“It allows the GSD to also operate on the ground while also providing advisory services,” he said.

Looking beyond copper

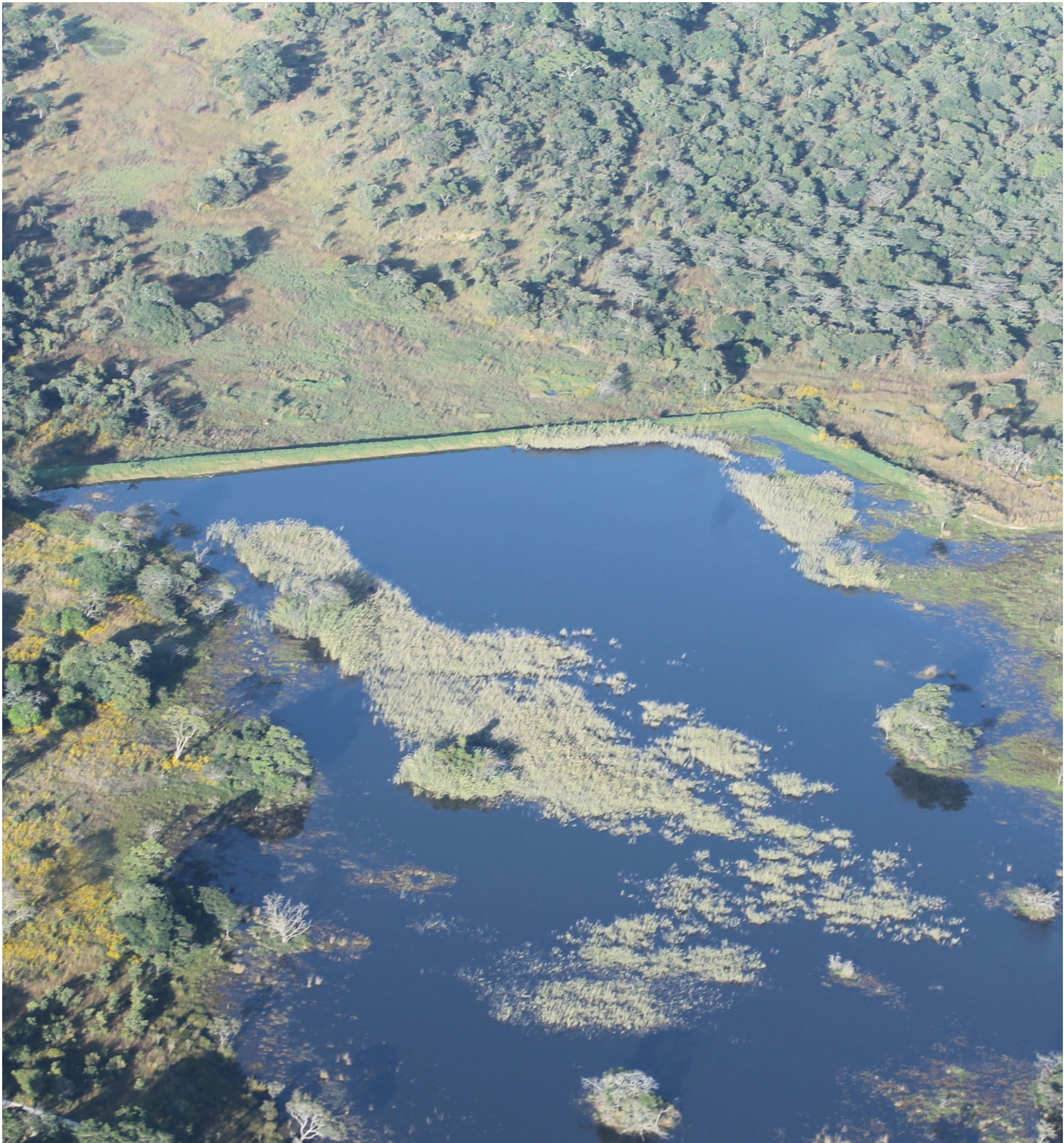
The mapping programme is also intended to improve Zambia’s understanding of minerals identified as critical or strategic under the country’s National Critical Minerals Strategy.

These include lithium, nickel, manganese, graphite, rare earth elements, tantalum and tungsten.

Chifwepa said the department’s priorities include completing and interpreting the aerial survey, expanding conventional geological mapping and strengthening the national geoscientific information system.

The information has uses beyond mining. Geological data can also assist with groundwater assessment, infrastructure development, environmental management and identifying hazards such as unstable ground and sinkholes.

Chifwepa said the broader objective was to ensure decisions about Zambia’s mineral resources are increasingly based on reliable geological evidence.



UN probes networks luring foreigners with job offers into Russia’s war

From page 1

By MakaanDay Editor,

LUSAKA — An independent United Nations investigation has uncovered networks of agents and intermediaries allegedly luring foreign nationals with promises of lucrative civilian jobs in Russia, only for some to find themselves serving on the front lines of the war in Ukraine.

The findings raise questions for Zambia and other African countries about whether their citizens could be vulnerable to deceptive overseas recruitment and what safeguards exist for people accepting employment offers abroad.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine said foreign nationals from countries across different continents had ended up serving in the Russian army after being deceived about the purpose of their travel.

According to the Commission, agents and intermediaries promised recruits lucrative civilian jobs and facilitated their travel to Russia, including providing tickets and visas.

The recruits were met by agents at Russian airports, but soon after arriving they were compelled to sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defence, the Commission said.

“The vast majority did not understand Russian or the terms of these contracts and found themselves serving on the frontlines in Ukraine,” Commission Chair Erik Møse told the UN Human Rights Council on September 21.

The Commission did not identify the nationalities of the affected foreigners in its latest public statements and did not say whether any Zambian citizens were among those it investigated.

That leaves an important question for Zambian authorities, whether any citizens have travelled to Russia expecting civilian employment and subsequently found themselves involved in the conflict.

The Commission said some foreign nationals already living in Russia, including people serving prison sentences, had also been coerced by Russian authorities into joining the armed forces.

Zambia has already experienced one such case. MakaanDay previously documented the case of Zambian student Lemekani Nyirenda, who died while fighting for Russia in Ukraine. Nyirenda had been serving a prison sentence in Russia when he was recruited by the Wagner Group, the Russian private military organisation whose fighters were deployed in Ukraine.

But military recruitment is not the only way the war has drawn young Africans to Russia.

In a separate investigation published in 2025, MakaanDay examined the recruitment of young African women, including Zambians, to the Alabuga Start programme in Russia. The women were attracted by promises of relatively well-paid employment and skills training, but the programme has faced scrutiny over conditions at the Alabuga Special Economic Zone and its links to the production of drones used in Russia’s war against Ukraine.

MakaanDay spoke to a young African woman working at Alabuga who described strict controls, unexpected deductions from her salary and restrictions on movement within parts of the sprawling industrial complex. She said some recruits had left the programme because they could not cope with the workload and workplace culture.

The investigation also found that recruitment for the programme had been promoted in Zambia through social media and Russian-linked organisations. At the time, MakaanDay sought answers from the Zambian government about what it knew of the programme and whether authorities had investigated the recruitment of Zambians. A source within Zambia’s Department of Anti-Human

Trafficking later confirmed that the unit had been asked to look into the programme.

The consequences for recruits and their families have been severe.

According to the Commission, many recruits died shortly after reaching the front lines, while others went missing, were injured or were captured by Ukrainian forces.

Families have subsequently struggled from their home countries to establish what happened to their relatives, the Commission said, adding that recruiting agents often block their calls.

The Commission acknowledged that not every foreigner fighting in Ukraine had been deceived. It said many foreign nationals had knowingly and voluntarily joined both Russian and Ukrainian armed forces.

Its current investigation is focusing particularly on foreigners it says were deceived or coerced into joining Russian forces.

The findings could put greater attention on how overseas employment opportunities are advertised and monitored in countries whose citizens seek work abroad.

The Commission also disclosed that several states, including members of the UN Human Rights Council, had not responded to questions connected to its investigation into foreign recruitment.

It did not name those countries in the statement. Beyond the recruitment of foreigners, the Commission raised fresh concerns over the effects of the continuing war on civilians, particularly as Ukraine approaches another winter.

It said Russian forces continued systematic waves of attacks against Ukraine’s critical energy infrastructure during the severe winter of 2025–2026, when temperatures fell to minus 20 degrees Celsius.

Power installations, transmission lines,

heating facilities and gas infrastructure were damaged or destroyed, leaving millions of civilians facing prolonged electricity cuts and shortages or complete loss of heating for extended periods.

One 74-year-old woman living on the 18th floor of a building in Kyiv told investigators that electricity cuts frequently stopped the lifts, leaving her trapped in freezing conditions.

“There was no way to go in or out. I lay cold and hungry, without medicine, without anything,” she told the Commission.

Ukrainian authorities recorded cold-related deaths and injuries, according to the investigation.

The Commission said it had also followed reports of Ukrainian attacks on infrastructure inside Russia and Russian-controlled areas of Ukraine, with reports indicating civilian casualties and damage to civilian property. It said, however, that a lack of access and information had prevented it from investigating those incidents.

Another strand of the investigation concerns Ukrainian children living in Russian-occupied territories.

The Commission said Russia had extended its patriotic education curriculum into occupied Ukrainian areas, with programmes promoting Russia made compulsory even for young children.

It said children from the age of 14 were receiving mandatory practical military training that included handling weapons and conducting military drills.

Some children had found the system unbearable and fled, sometimes alone, to Ukrainian government-controlled territory, exposing themselves to significant security risks and hardship, according to the Commission.

Four and a half years after Russia’s full-scale invasion, the Commission said more than 17,000 civilians had been killed

UN probes networks luring foreigners with job offers into Russia’s war cont...

and almost 54,000 injured in Ukraine, citing figures from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

It said civilian casualties increased by 55% between January and September 2026 compared with the corresponding period in 2025 amid an escalation in Russian long-range attacks on populated areas.

The Commission said it continues to investigate alleged violations on both sides of the front line and reiterated the need for judicial and non-judicial accountability and support for victims.

Its findings from the continuing investigations are expected to be presented to the UN General Assembly’s 81st session in October.

Members of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine brief reporters at UN Headquarters on 31 October 2024.

At left is Pablo de Greiff, in the centre is Erik Møse, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, and at right is Vrinda Grover.

Photo Credit: UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe



Nyirenda's body





INVESTIGATE.
EXPLAIN.
INSPIRE CHANGE.

HOUSE BUSINESS

MakanDay’s weekly look inside Zambia’s National Assembly —
what MPs said, what they did, how they voted and why it matters to you.



From page 1

Before Parliament Gets Down to Business

President Hakainde Hichilema is expected to officially open the First Session of the Fourteenth National Assembly on October 9, according to Clerk of the National Assembly Loveness Mayaka. He is expected to provide an outline for his government’s policy direction and priorities for 2026–2027 as he begins his ,

At full strength, the new-look national assembly is expected to comprise more than 280 members and presiding officers. These include MPs elected from constituencies, MPs elected under the new proportional representation system and up to 11 MPs nominated by the President. The assembly also includes the vice-president, the speaker and two deputy speakers.

- **226 constituency-based MPs**
- **40 proportional representation MPs — 20 women, 15 youths and 5 persons with disabilities**
- **Up to 11 MPs nominated by the President**
- **The Vice-President**
- **The Speaker**
- **First and Second Deputy Speakers**

The 14th national assembly succeeds the 13th national assembly, which ran from 2021 to 2026. The numbering refers to successive parliamentary terms formed after general elections, rather than the number of sessions held by Parliament.

Under the National Assembly Standing Orders, a session is a period of parliamentary

business lasting no more than 12 months within the term of an assembly. It begins on the first sitting day after a general election or after the previous session has formally ended, and ends when that session is closed or parliament is dissolved.

For example, the 14th national assembly can remain in existence from 2026 to 2031, but during those five years it can have several sessions. When one session is formally ended through prorogation (formal ending), another session can subsequently begin.

This means the 14th national assembly can have several sessions during its five-year term, beginning with the first session that President Hichilema is expected to officially open on 9th October.

What is the first business of a new national assembly?

MPs are elected to speak for the people, make laws and hold the Government to account. But before they can debate Bills, question ministers or move motions, Zambia’s newly elected national assembly must first choose who will preside over the house.

When the expanded national assembly meets for the first time on October 2, MPs will elect the speaker, first deputy speaker and second deputy speaker.

Under the national assembly standing orders, the speaker must, within 30 days after a general election, publish a notice in the government gazette setting the date for the first sitting of the new assembly. Before that sitting, MPs are required to take and subscribe the oath or affirmation of

office, a process that has already been completed.

So who runs the House before there is a Speaker?

When MPs assemble for the first sitting, the Clerk of the national assembly reads the gazette notice convening the house. At this point, there is no elected speaker to preside over proceedings. The Clerk therefore takes charge.

The Clerk presides over the election of the new presiding officers and determines questions that arise before and during those elections.

And there is an important restriction: until a speaker is elected, the national assembly cannot transact any other business.

That means no bills, motions, questions to ministers or other ordinary parliamentary business can take precedence over choosing the speaker.

How is the speaker elected?

MPs elect the speaker by simple majority through the secret ballot. Unlike the second deputy speaker, the speaker is not chosen from among sitting MPs.

Candidates for speaker may be submitted by the President and by political parties holding seats in the national. The candidates must be qualified to be elected as MPs but cannot themselves be serving MPs.

Once MPs have elected the speaker, they proceed to elect the first and second deputy speakers.



There is another safeguard built into this arrangement: the two deputy speakers must be of different genders and cannot belong to the same political party.

The first deputy speaker is elected from candidates selected by political parties represented in the assembly and is not an MP. The second deputy speaker is elected from among the MPs themselves.

Only after parliament has dealt with its presiding officers can the new assembly move towards its wider legislative, representative and oversight work.

So while election day determines who gets into parliament, the first sitting determines who will preside over it.

Will Hichilema nominate Nelly Mutti for another term as Speaker?

HOUSE BUSINESS is MakanDay Weekly’s window into Zambia’s national assembly — following the questions MPs ask, the laws they debate, the answers ministers give and, where the record allows, how your MP votes. We cut through parliamentary language to explain what happened, why it matters and what it means for you.

This week in the Bulletin & Record

“Perhaps I’ll come back later in life” — Remembering Fr Felix Phiri

Before his death in Cairo in March 2026, **Zambian Catholic priest and scholar Fr Felix Jere Phiri** spent much of his missionary life away from home, studying Islam and promoting Christian-Muslim dialogue. In this interview from the Bulletin & Record archives, Marja Hinfelaar spoke to him about leaving Zambia, discovering Islam, becoming a missionary and whether he would one day return home.

“Perhaps I’ll come back later in life, when I am about to retire, if ever there was such a thing for a priest.”

When Fr Phiri spoke those words to Hinfelaar, he was reflecting on a missionary life that had taken him far beyond the Copperbelt where he was born. He remained certain of one thing: “Zambia is still my home.”

Fr Phiri would spend much of his priestly and academic life moving between Africa and Europe, becoming a specialist in Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. His work included Muslim Associations and the Resurgence of Islam in Zambia, a book published in 2008, which examined the development and growing visibility of Islam in Zambia. FENZA still lists the book among its publications.

Fr Phiri died in Cairo, Egypt, on 11 March 2026, aged 57. The Missionaries of Africa, commonly known as the White Fathers, said his 29 years of missionary life had taken him to Egypt, Tunisia, Great Britain, Italy, Kenya and Zambia.

His death gives new meaning to one of the final questions in this interview: would he ever come back to Zambia? His answer was characteristically reflective.

“Perhaps I’ll come back later in life, when I am about to retire, if ever there was such a thing for a priest. Zambia is still my home.”

In tribute to Fr Phiri, MakaanDay republishes this conversation from the Bulletin & Record archives.

Marja Hinfelaar caught up with Fr Felix J. Phiri (MAfr), a Zambian diasporian who is professor at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome, Italy, and director of Etudes Arabes, a journal which presents specific themes on Islam through a translation of key related Arabic texts into French, English and Italian, with a detailed and elaborate introduction in French. He is also the author of Muslim Associations

and the Resurgence of Islam in Zambia (published by FENZA with The Lembani Trust, Lusaka 2008).

Could you tell us about your background and how you came to your decision to become a Catholic priest?

I was born in 1968 on the Copperbelt in Kalulushi District. My late father, Dominic R. Phiri, worked for Zambia Forestry and Forest Industries Corporation in Kafubu. In secondary school I developed an interest in the priesthood. The seed was already there because when I was ten years old my mother, Euphrazia Phiri, had hinted at the idea of me going to Msupazi minor seminary, in Chipata diocese, but at the time I did not really understand what it was all about. Some years later, while at Chiwala Boys Secondary School, in Ndola, I met Fr Aiden McChristal, an Irish SMA priest, a vocation promoter for Ndola diocese. He was our chaplain at Chiwala. Just a few months after my arrival at Chiwala my desire for priesthood was rekindled. In 1985, I joined the Minor Seminary at the Franciscan Centre in Ndola and I was transferred from Chiwala to Kansenshi Secondary School.

During my three years’ stay in the minor seminary, I realised that there existed a whole range of religious congregations one could join. I was not so sure about becoming a diocesan or a Franciscan priest. After a discussion with Fr McChrystal, who was an RE teacher at Kansenshi, I came to hear about the White Fathers, officially known as Missionaries of Africa. After a vocation camp of one month at Lubwe mission in Luapula Province, in January 1988, I was accepted to train as a missionary priest. In August 1988, I left for St Mbaaga major seminary in Mwanza, Tanzania.

How was your experience in Tanzania?

During our formation in Tanzania we studied mainly philosophy, together with other White Father students from Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda. It was a new experience for me, but at the same time it was close and familiar because of my exposure to seminary life in Ndola and the six weeks experience of White Father community life in Ilondola (Chinsali district) before travelling to Tanzania for the first time.

Moreover, Tanzania did not feel very far from Zambian. I quickly learnt Kiswahili sufficiently enough to get along with the local people. During this time I came to have a better understanding of the meaning of being a missionary. At some point, I was not sure I could really manage this type of life. I was even tempted to abandon the training and continue with other studies back home in Zambia.

What followed after your three years’ stay in Tanzania?

After completing the seminary training in Tanzania in 1991, I was sent to do my novitiate in Fribourg, in Switzerland, together with other students from Africa, America and Europe.

This was my first experience in Europe. But again, I entered this new reality through the familiar and protected environment of the White Fathers. All the practical issues related to travelling and adapting to a new environment was facilitated by the White Fathers. I was shielded from the first cultural shock normally experienced under such circumstances, as I was “led by the hand” to ease into society. It was a positive thing, but I could imagine someone arriving at the airport not knowing what to do next. That would be a different experience.

Why did you choose to go to Tunisia for your first pastoral experience?

After the novitiate I had requested for such an experience because I was intrigued by the idea of becoming a missionary knowing that there were other people, Muslims, with a similar missionary pretention. This wasn’t just about a missionary engagement; it was also about my own spiritual journey. I reasoned that if what I believed in was so absolute, how come that other people had a different religion? What do people believe in other than what I believed in? To find answers to these questions I needed to meet people who were religiously different from me.

I was in Tunisia from 1992 to 1994. Again, I was taken care of by confreres and slowly introduced into society. Nonetheless, this was the first time that I felt culturally and religiously out of place. Things were so different, people were so different. It was like Europe, but it wasn’t. It was like Africa, but it wasn’t. For the first time I was confronted with a language that felt completely different from all I ever knew before.

I was cautioned by my confreres to be careful not to discuss religion anyhow, to avoid offending my Muslim interlocutors. This was difficult, especially because my main reason of going to North Africa was to practice interreligious dialogue! Not being based in a parish where people spontaneously come and see you, here you had to create your own opportunities to meet people. The time I spent among the Muslim youth of a pre-professional school run by the White Fathers in La Marsa, on the outskirts of Tunis, gave me a certain understanding of an urban Muslim society.

I started learning Arabic at that time, both the Tunisian dialect and modern Arabic. I was struck by the overwhelming omnipresence of religion. You were never far away from a mosque. I made a lot of friends,

• Nevers Mumba seeks an Africa whose leaders have “morality and integrity” cont...

such as Afif Karafi, who introduced me into their families and I was adopted ever since as a member of their household.

Did you return to Tunisia after completing of your theological studies?

Yes, after three years of studies in Toulouse, France, I was ordained a priest in 1997 and appointed back to Tunisia as a full-fledged missionary. This required me following a complementary three years licentiate course in Rome at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI). The first year was done at Dar Comboni in Cairo.

After two years, I decided to interrupt the course and return to Tunisia. I was appointed national chaplain of students from sub-Saharan Africa studying in Tunisian universities. It was a big challenge albeit very enriching. I learnt a lot about francophone Africa, as the greater majority of the students came from there. Our activities ranged from retreats and masses to oecumenical, dialogical, social and cultural activities.

I became aware of the misfortune African intelligent and talented youth were subjected to due to failed educational systems in most of our sub-Saharan African countries. Most of them ended up crossing over to Europe or stayed on in Tunisia upon the completion of their studies because their own countries had nothing to offer them.

What made you embark on a PhD programme?

After two years in Tunisia, I went back to Rome to finish the licentiate programme at PISAI. In the course of my second stay in Rome I was requested to embark on a PhD programme in view of specialised services in the domain of interreligious dialogue. In 2002, I enrolled as a full-time PhD student at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) in London. The idea of doing a PhD came as a great challenge for me, especially that my initial intention was simply to go back to Tunisia and continue from where I had left.

After getting advice from different people, and much to my own surprise,

I decided to base my thesis on Islam in Zambia. Although in fact the situation of Islam in Zambia is still rudimentary, with a few exceptions here and there, the research was informative not only for myself, but also for the Muslims themselves. It was in order to facilitate the accessibility of the findings of my research that I transformed my thesis into a book.

For all this time that you have been living abroad, have you been in touch with fellow Zambians?

During my early years of missionary training abroad I did not engage very much with a Zambian diaspora, simply because there were very few Zambians in most of the countries where I spent all these years. Rather I met a lot of people from West Africa, Congo and North Africa.

Later, when I was ordained priest, I met with a considerable number of Zambians. Most of those I met were the Zambian diplomatic community of such countries as Egypt, Rome and Great Britain. However, during my four year stay in London I was able to interact with a lot of Zambians, mainly Catholics.

In the photo: Fr. Phiri (left) with the late Medardo Cardinal Mazombwe and other Zambian priests in Rome, Italy.

This story was first published by the Bulletin & Record Magazine in September 2011.

In 2003, Bishop Lungu and the then Archbishop of Lusaka, Cardinal Mazombwe, visited London. On that occasion the Zambian community organised a communal mass. People were so happy with the experience that they proposed to meet more regularly. So once every month we had mass together. With that I was drawn into participating in the life of the Zambian community in London on such other occasions as funerals, sicknesses, social celebrations, etc.

When I left the UK in 2006, the activities of the community were quite consistent although attended by a relatively smaller group. In the meantime the group had even become an association, the Zambian Catholics and Friends in the UK. Several priests served the community after my departure until the official appointment of Fr Clement Mukuka as Chaplain of the Zambian community in the UK, in 2011.

In Rome, the Zambian community has been united around such diligent and generous individuals as Mr and Mrs Francis Manza, Mr and Mrs Godfrey Kampamba, and others who have been in the country

for a long time. Since the re-establishment of the Zambian embassy in Rome, several members of the Zambian diplomatic community have made an outstanding contribution to the life of the Zambian community in Italy, of which I have been the president in the past two years. Somehow we have managed to maintain some form of unity in spite of our diversity; our members fall into four main categories, the embassy community, Catholic religious men and women, professionals working for such international organisations such as FAO, WFP etc, and individuals living in Italy for personal or marital reasons, not to forget non-Zambian friends.

For the last five years you have taught and lived in Rome. Will you ever come back to Zambia?

As a missionary you normally work outside your home country. Perhaps I'll come back later in life, when I am about to retire, if ever there was such a thing for a priest. Zambia is still my home. I never lived in another country for a longer period of time, so I never got attached to another country.



In the photo: Fr. Phiri (left) with the late Medardo Cardinal Mazombwe and other Zambian priests in Rome, Italy.

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