

Zimbabwe's newspaper industry grapples with rising costs

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Escalating printing and newsprint costs are conspiring to create a nightmare for the newspaper publishing industry in Zimbabwe, battling to survive under a volatile economic environment and legislative controls largely considered draconian.

Harare - The latest blow to the sector has been a price blitz launched recently by the Zimbabwean government, forcing retailers and manufacturers to reduce prices regardless of rising input costs.

After an announcement that the cover price of *The Financial Gazette* would rise from ZW\$50 000 to ZW\$100 000 early July, a cabinet task force forced the newspaper to maintain its old price.

Industry players said this also happened at *The Zimbabwe Independent*, another independent weekly business newspaper publishing Fridays, and a day after *The Financial Gazette*, which comes out on Thursdays, as well as the independent Sunday title, *The Standard*, which falls under the same stable with *The Zimbabwe Independent*.

The Financial Gazette and *The Zimbabwe Independent's* cover prices have traditionally increased concurrently by equal margins.

An increase in printing and newsprint costs sparked the cover-price increases. An executive with a printing company said the rising cost of printing plates, as well as printing inks was forcing them to review prices monthly.

The executive said: "Owing to the ever increasing costs, printing charges will be reviewed monthly."

Printing charges went up by 50% early June to ZW\$13 million for an eight-page section of a tabloid size newspaper, and again by 115% during the same month to ZW\$28 million.

Executives were not willing to discuss reviews made in July, fearing a backlash from the government taskforce on prices.

The Financial Gazette, which prints on pink paper, announced last Thursday a cut in "tonnage of pink newsprint used weekly to mitigate the haemorrhage caused by the directive" to slash prices.

"The current prices as reflected in the cover price and the advertising rates have placed us in a position where we are not recovering all our costs and hence we have been forced to reduce the expensive pink newsprint to cover pages only. The rest of the newspaper will be on the cheaper white newsprint until further notice," said chief executive officer, Jacob

Chisese.

The state-owned weekly, *The Sunday Mail*, this week omitted printing some sections of the newspaper after what it said had been “the slashing of the tonnage of newsprint delivered to Zimpapers,” which also publishes the *Herald*, and five other titles.

“This has also resulted in the cutting of the print order thereby denying some readers access to the paper,” *The Sunday Mail* editor said in a notice.

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