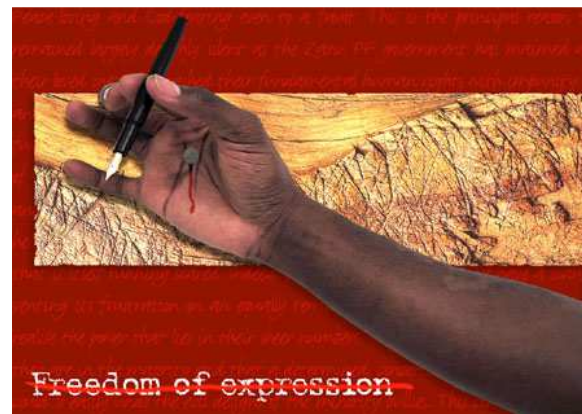


**WORLDWIDE READING
FOR DEMOCRACY AND MEDIA
FREEDOM IN ZIMBABWE**



“Zimbabwean voices are twice censored, once in Zimbabwe and again in South Africa. I refer to the disgraceful attempt by our public broadcaster, the SABC, to prevent certain individuals from commenting on Zimbabwe.” Jane Duncan of the Freedom of Expression Institute expressed this view in a statement at a Reading for Democracy and Media Freedom in Zimbabwe on Friday night, 7 September 2006. Duncan, who had just returned from a meeting in Malawi on elections in Southern Africa, said it was clear that it would be impossible to have a free and fair election in Zimbabwe without the removal of extremely repressive legislation such as the Public Order Security Act (POSA).

Duncan’s opening remarks were followed by readings from poets from Zimbabwe and South Africa to an audience of 150 people packed into a small theatre at the University of Witwatersrand. Thabitha Khumalo, the vice-chairperson of the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, spoke movingly of sufferings of Zimbabwean women who struggle to feed their families without water and electricity and to survive with no access to medication. “We are dying of AIDS and with no food, no medicine, no transport to even get to a clinic, we are being sentenced to death and we are serving that sentence within our own homes.”

Innocent Ncube, dubbed by many as “Zimbabwe’s national poet” provided a humorous touch with his rendition of his most famous poem “I am Bob, the Man” about the dictator Bob who boasts about how leaders have come and gone in other countries but he is still there. Innocent proved to be a capable master of ceremonies of a programme that included a special tribute to Zimbabwe’s most famous literary son, Dambudzo Marechera. Innocent Ncube, Elinor Sisulu, and young Zimbabwean woman poet, Ethel Kabwato, read Marechera’s poems, “ In Jail the only telephone is the washbasin” and “Oracle of the Povo.. Another emerging female poet, Linda Gabriel read her own poetic tribute to Marechera. Nixon Nyikadzino read the poems of Chirikure Chirikure and Nicholas Mkaronda read Chenjerai’s moving poem about Operation Murambatsvina.

Zimbabwe’s youthful creative energy was on display with spirited performances from the Toyi Toyi collective who had traveled down from Harare for the event and South African-based Zimbabwean groups, Creative Writer’s Collective and Mthwakazi. The audience was especially the plaintive call of a capella group Abanqobi Bomhlaba’s ever popular song *Lindela* - in which they bemoan the plight of Zimbabwean’s fleeing the terror of their own country only to be met with violence in South Africa and thrown into the Lindela detention camp. The audience recognised an exciting new talent in the young South African poet Vusimuzi whose poem dealt with xenophobia in South Africa. Veteran poet, writer and activist Don Mattera, who was unable to attend as a result of a bereavement, sent a message of solidarity in which he too condemned South African indifference to the suffering of Zimbabweans.

The Johannesburg reading, jointly organized by the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition, the Freedom of Expression Institute and the Platform for Public Deliberation, was the first in a series of readings on Democracy and Media Freedom in Zimbabwe that took place globally under the auspices of the Berlin literature festival. The global readathon was the third Worldwide Reading organized by the Berlin Literature Festival under the theme: *"The Anniversary of a Political Lie."* The first Worldwide Reading in 2005 appealed for peace in Iraq. The second reading in 2006 was in memoriam of the award-winning Russian journalist, Anna Politkovskaya, who was assassinated for her courageous reporting on human rights abuses in Chechnya.

Poems by acclaimed Zimbabwean writers Chenjerai Hove, Chirikuré Chirikuré and Dumbudzo Marachera, as well as Elinor Sisulu's foreword written for the book "Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980-1988" (Johannesburg 2007) were chosen as core texts read in over 40 countries worldwide. .

In South Africa veteran poets and activists Dennis Brutus and acclaimed poet/storyteller Gcina Mhlophe will be among those participated in a reading organized by the Centre of Civil Society in Durban and in Grahamstown, a reading was organized on the eve of the Highway Africa Conference that brought together media practitioners from all over Africa.