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Websites a Way Around Zimbabwe Shortages

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LONDON — Inflation and shortages in Zimbabwe, whose government is accused of ruining the economy, are leading its citizens abroad to use high-tech ways to help out their loved ones at home.

Zimbabweans abroad have found ways to pitch in — giving part of their earnings in South Africa, for example, to businessmen there, who then truck food, cooking oil and other scarcities across the border.

Now Internet-based companies are offering a high-tech solution: Go online and buy loved ones back home everything from fuel and food to generators.

The Web site Mukuru.com offers an alternative to long lines at gas stations short of fuel. Once a friend or relative has logged on and paid for fuel, the company sends a text message to the recipient's cell phone in Zimbabwe containing a 10-digit number the person can exchange for vouchers at a designated coupon office. They can then fill up their car at stations that import fuel independently and sell at market rates, rather than having to scramble for fuel when it becomes available locally at prices heavily subsidized by the government.

Two other sites, Zimbuyer.com and Zimland.com, offer a virtual shopping center of Zimbabwe goods. Sitting in front of their computer abroad, people can pay for Zimbabwean staples such as sadza — corn meal — and a popular brand of baked beans, or even TVs and power generators, that are then delivered to addresses in the country's three largest cities within 72 hours. Buyers can log on to check the delivery status.

Mukuru.com founder Rob, who gave only his first name out of concern for his family in Zimbabwe — where criticism of the government and its management of the economy can be dangerous — came up with the idea when he worked for a multimedia firm. His site is run by eight Zimbabweans based in Britain, home to the second largest immigrant community of Zimbabweans after South Africa.

He said cell phone users in the West were fixated on the pictures they could put up on their phone screens or take with them, or features like using their phones as radios. But in the developing world, he said, "the power of the mobile phone was the SMS" — text message.

Africans in general have pioneered the use of cell phones to transfer value by using airtime as a virtual currency. Phone users can sell airtime for real money, or trade it for something else, thereby avoiding the relatively high costs of transferring small amounts of money through banks.

In 2005, the most recent year for which figures were available, Zimbabwe had 668,000 cell phone subscribers, a penetration rate of 5.6 percent — twice the penetration of land lines — according to the U.N.'s International Telecommunication Union, which is responsible for standardization, coordination and development of international telecommunications.

In Zimbabwe, the technology met a stark need. Thea Fourie, a South Africa-based analyst for independent market analysis firm Global Insight, said scarce goods and high unemployment in Zimbabwe, combined with salaries not keeping up with the rises in goods and services, meant any transfer of money to Zimbabweans from abroad could help.

In the United States, some retailers offer services which allow immigrants to buy large appliances and other goods for their families back in Central America. But the Zimbabwean Web sites have a more vital task due to the country's political situation.

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe is accused by critics in the West and at home of ruining what was once an African economic success story with a chaotic and often-violent campaign to seize thousands of white-owned commercial farms for redistribution to black Zimbabweans. Mugabe defends the program as a way of fixing severe imbalances in land ownership inherited from British

colonial rule. He blames food shortages in a country that once was a regional breadbasket on years of crippling drought, and has cracked down on dissenters.

Fourie said that while some Zimbabweans could be helped by money from abroad, it would have only a "marginal" impact on overall economic performance in Zimbabwe, "because the whole problem is so structured around the political aspect."

A Zimbuyer.com spokesman, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear for his family in Zimbabwe, said that the site's most popular items were cooking oil, soap, rice, meat, and corn meal.

"Also people are buying the power generators a lot because there are 20-hour power cuts in Harare now," he said.

The company is run by four Zimbabweans in Britain and the United States.

Douglas Siwira, a 41-year-old businessman living in England, uses Mukuru.com to buy fuel for his family in Zimbabwe. He praises the "promptness" of the transaction.

Mukuru.com started in February 2006 and now has 6,500 customers all over the world. It also allows those registered on the site to pay for satellite TV for and transfer money to people in Zimbabwe, and plans to offer additional minutes of mobile airtime by the end of the month.

Zimbabweans are allowed to have foreign currency accounts in local banks, but the money can only be changed at the official exchange rate. So Zimbabweans living abroad also protect their earnings by keeping them in foreign banks and transferring money only as needed.

The companies may have started with the idea of helping their countrymen. Now they are looking at expanding to other parts of Africa where it is easier to operate. Mukuru.com has already started offering services to South Africa and now plans to branch out into Kenya and Zambia by July, Malawi by August and Ghana by the end of the year.

"I think the tragedy of the situation is we're least excited about Zimbabwe," said Rob. "We're out to spend time and money in Africa. We want to be putting billboards up, we want to be sponsoring attractions and music events there."

On the Net:

<http://www.mukuru.com/>

<http://zimbuyer.com/>

<http://zimland.com/>

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