A War Thousands of Miles Away Is Draining Wallets in Harare

By Tanatsiwa Dambuza

Fuel prices jumped 16% overnight after the US airstrikes hit Iran. Kombi fares have doubled. Food prices are moving before the week is out. A confirmed oil discovery in Muzarabani sits underfunded. And a significant opening exists for African philanthropy and capital to step into a gap that foreign investors are currently filling alone.

Harare, Zimbabwe raised fuel prices by 16% on the 5th of March 2026, with diesel reaching $1.77 per litre and petrol at $1.71, after US-Israeli airstrikes on Iran sent global oil markets into turmoil and pushed Brent crude above $100 per barrel for the first time since 2022. Two weeks later, the prices surged again with diesel and petrol surging nearly 16% and 27% per litre, respectively, to US$2.05 and US$2,17, making Zimbabwe's fuel the most expensive in Southern Africa. Energy analysts say the increases are a preview of larger shocks still four to eight weeks away, as pre-war supply contracts expire and more expensive shipments arrive.

The landlocked nation imports every litre of fuel it consumes, leaving it uniquely exposed to disruptions in the Persian Gulf. Transport operators announced fare increases within hours of the pump price adjustment. Hospital administrators flagged rising costs for diesel-powered generators. Farmers in Masvingo province said irrigation had become unaffordable overnight. Iran's threat to close the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20% of global oil flows daily, has sent price shocks to at least 95 countries in five days.

Even before this week's increase, Zimbabwe ranked as the second most expensive fuel market in SADC and the fourth highest in sub-Saharan Africa. Government taxes and levies account for roughly 30% of the retail price. A near-monopoly in the ethanol blending sector and a dormant Feruka pipeline from Beira add further structural costs before a litre reaches the pump. The war in Iran simply piled onto a structure already tilted against ordinary consumers.

"We are working for the kombis": Voices from the Street

For the millions of Zimbabweans who depend on public transport, the fuel increase did not arrive as an economic abstraction. It arrived as a notice taped to a kombi window before dawn. Tatenda Mukaha, a kombi driver on the Harare CBD to Kuwadzana route, said he had no choice but to raise his fares the same morning the pump price changed. "The owner still wants his daily hire fee. The police still want their levies. The only person I can go to is the passenger," he said. "I did not want to raise the fare. But I would have been driving at a loss by midday."

A survey across Harare and Bulawayo found that fares had doubled on several routes within 48 hours. In Harare, CBD routes now carry a minimum fare of $1, with Chitungwiza commuters paying $1.50 off-peak and $2 at rush hour. In Bulawayo, operators are charging up to $2 per city trip, with late-night fares doubling again on top of that. Commuter Sibusisiwe Munaku of Nkulumane says the sudden hike has torn through her budget, forcing her to skip meals just to cover her commute home. Thomas Chapungu, a Mount Pleasant Heights resident, was equally frustrated, saying that workers like him had essentially become slaves to the transportation system, with a large portion of their pay "going towards fares" before they could spend it on anything else. The Ministry of Local Government issued a caution to operators, stating that a 100% fare increase is not justified by global fuel movements alone. Commuters noted, however, that fares have historically not come back down once raised, citing COVID-era increases that remained in place long after restrictions were lifted.

"I stand at that bus stop and I feel ashamed. Not because I am lazy, I wake up before sunrise every day. But by the time I get home, I have nothing left. Not even enough to feed myself properly. I am working, but I am going backwards. What kind of life is that?"— Sibusisiwe Munaku, Nkulumane

---

Food Prices Follow Within Days
The fare increases are only the first wave. Every step in Zimbabwe's food supply chain, from farm to wholesaler to market stall, runs on diesel. When the cost of moving goods rises, the cost of goods rises. Vendors at Mupedzanhamo reported that wholesale prices for cooking oil, tomatoes, and maize meal had already begun moving upward within 72 hours of the pump price announcement. "My supplier called me the same day," said one vendor. "He said his transport cost went up, and I must expect the new price by Monday. I cannot absorb it. I will have to pass it on." For households already on compressed budgets, the sequence is punishing. The commuter now paying $4 a day in fares where she paid $2 has effectively taken a 10 to 15% pay cut with no change to her salary. The food she buys on the way home costs more than it did last week. The salary that must cover all of it has not changed.

Muzarabani: Zimbabwe is Sitting on the Answer
While Zimbabweans absorb price shocks from a war they are not directly involved in, confirmed oil and gas deposits sit largely undeveloped in the country's own north. The Muzarabani project in Mashonaland Central has been described by independent analysts as the largest undrilled hydrocarbon structure in onshore Africa, with an estimated 8.2 trillion cubic feet of gas and 247 million barrels of oil. In March 2024, Zimbabwe's Minister of Mines confirmed that the Mukuyu-2 well had yielded light oil, natural gas, helium, and hydrogen. Light oil requires minimal refinery processing and yields a high proportion of diesel and petrol per barrel, exactly what Zimbabwe currently imports at international market rates.

In 2025, Invictus Energy secured backing from Zimbabwe's Mutapa Investment Fund to advance the project. Beyond the Zambezi Valley, six additional sedimentary basins carry the right geological conditions for exploration. None have been substantially explored. Moving from discovery to production requires bankable feasibility studies, seismic surveys, and sustained capital. The project is advancing, but largely on the back of a foreign-listed company and a sovereign wealth fund. A broader base of African investment capital could accelerate what is already in motion.

African Philanthropy: From Capital Deployment to Structural Change
Africa's philanthropic and investment community has built real momentum in recent years, and the tools to engage a crisis like this one are increasingly in place. Aliko Dangote's announced investment of at least $1 billion in Zimbabwe, spanning cement, power generation, and a petroleum products pipeline, points directly at the kind of infrastructure that could reduce the cost of moving fuel inland and shield the country from the worst of future global price shocks.

But individual investment at scale, however significant, is not the same as structural change. The concern raised by practitioners across Africa's philanthropic networks is that concentrating energy infrastructure decisions in the hands of single actors, however well-intentioned, risks reproducing the same dependency dynamics that have left countries like Zimbabwe exposed. A pipeline owned by one billionaire is still one whose terms, pricing, and continuity rest on one person's decisions. That is a different kind of vulnerability, not the absence of one. The question African philanthropy must now ask is not who has the capital to build the next pipeline, it is who gets to decide how energy systems are built, who they serve, and on what terms. Community-based philanthropy, rooted in the lived experiences of people like Sibusisiwe Munaku and Tatenda Mukaha, is specifically positioned to centre those questions. The shift toward community-led models within African philanthropy represents a deliberate rejection of top-down dynamics: resources flowing from powerful actors to passive recipients, with accountability running upward rather than to the communities most affected. Replicating that structure with African billionaires at the top is not a departure from the problem. It is a variation of that.

Elumelu's Heirs Energies already manages Nigeria's OML 17 oil block at a production capacity of 50,000 barrels per day, demonstrating that African-led upstream energy investment at scale is not only possible but operational. The Tony Elumelu Foundation has disbursed over $100 million to more than 24,000 entrepreneurs across all 54 African countries, generating an estimated $4.2 billion in revenue and 1.5 million jobs. That capacity is most durable, however, when it is directed not only at capital deployment but also at shaping the policy conditions under which energy systems operate. The biggest strategic question for African philanthropy is not who should

fund the next pipeline, but how philanthropic institutions, civil society networks, and regional bodies can collectively push for energy governance frameworks that keep communities- not markets- at the centre.

In practice, this means philanthropic capital funding community energy cooperatives that give residents co-ownership of solar installations rather than dependency on a grid they cannot influence. It means backing civil society coalitions that can hold governments accountable for how Muzarabani's revenues are structured and distributed. It means supporting the policy advocacy work that shapes whether African Continental Free Trade Area's (AfCFTA) trade provisions are used to build regional fuel corridors that benefit consumers or simply open new markets for the same concentrated actors. None of this is abstract. It is the difference between a community in Kuwadzana that absorbs every global price shock as a personal crisis, and one that has a stake in the infrastructure that determines what fuel costs in the first place.

Beyond buffering against global price shocks, AfCFTA offers a framework for something more immediate: unlocking access to oil that already exists within the continent. Angola, drawing entirely from Atlantic basin supply outside the Strait of Hormuz zone, currently sells diesel at approximately $0.32 per litre, a fraction of what Zimbabweans pay today. The Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, and Equatorial Guinea have producing fields, but their output rarely reaches landlocked neighbours because trade corridors, pricing agreements, and regional infrastructure to move it do not yet exist, even though oil is abundant. AfCFTA's trade facilitation provisions offer the legal and institutional architecture to build exactly those corridors, turning African oil into African fuel, at African prices, for African consumers. Several international and local institutions have documented how privatising essential services has repeatedly failed to improve accessibility for the most vulnerable. Energy cannot follow the same path.

The gap is not one of capacity or intent. It is one of focus. A 2025 analysis in Frontiers in Climate found that philanthropic and impact capital in Africa has tended to flow toward education, health, and fintech sectors with clear metrics and shorter return timelines. Upstream energy and resource infrastructure, which needs long-term investment and commitment, has not received enough funding considering how important it is. Muzarabani's confirmed reserves, a functioning sovereign wealth vehicle in Mutapa, and an already-active exploration partner in Invictus Energy provide an unusually well-structured entry point for African investors willing to think beyond the short cycle.

The numbers make the case clearly. Africa holds 60% of the world's best solar resources but only 1% of global solar capacity. Experts estimate a solar transition alone could cut Zimbabwe's annual fuel import bill by up to $400 million within five years. Every dollar of African capital directed at domestic energy production or regional procurement infrastructure is a dollar that reduces dependence on distant supply chains and reduces the exposure of people like Sibusisiwe Munaku, Tatenda Mukaha, and the vendor at Mupedzahanhamo to wars they no part in starting.

What Comes Next

Angola currently sells diesel at a much lower price than Zimbabwe's current rate, with supply drawn entirely from the Atlantic basin, outside the Strait of Hormuz disruption zone. Zambia's opposition has already proposed a SADC-wide bulk-purchasing agreement involving Zimbabwe and Malawi, routing fuel through Beira and Dar es Salaam. The SADC Council of Ministers met in Pretoria and called for accelerated regional integration. The framework exists. The political will to act on it, and the African private capital to back it, would complete the picture.

Least developed countries, the majority of them in Africa, currently spend approximately $40 billion annually on debt servicing, more than their combined health and education expenditures. Major bilateral donors have reduced development spending significantly in recent years. That withdrawal creates space and need for African-led capital to move into energy security in a way that external funders have historically deprioritized and will continue to deprioritize on the continent's behalf.

A country confirmed to sit on light oil, gas, helium, and hydrogen, within what geologists call the largest undrilled onshore structure in Africa, is paying $1.77 per liter for diesel imported from around the world. In its markets, food prices are rising before the week is out. On its kombis, drivers are passing costs to passengers, who are

choosing between lunch and the fare home. The crisis is real and immediate. But so is the opportunity: confirmed reserves, existing frameworks, capable partners, and a continent with both the capital and the stated ambition to reduce exactly this kind of dependency. The conditions for a different outcome already exist. What they need now is commitment.