

Hip-hop dancers defy Zimbabwe's woes



Members of the dance-theatre ensemble Elysium go through their paces during a rehearsal at a municipal park in Zimbabwe's capital Harar. —AFP photos

Wearing baggy matching T-shirts and exuding urban street style, the dancers spin through their routines to a backtrack of thumping hip-hop beats—not in a park in New York, but in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. The Elysium dance group brings a rare burst of energy to weekday lunchtime in Harare, a dilapidated city that has endured years of economic decline, authoritarian rule and mass emigration.

Much of Zimbabwe's official data is unreliable, but figures suggest less people are in formal jobs than any time since 1968, and some economists put unemployment as high as 80 percent. Millions of young people have left the country since 2000 when government-backed seizures of white-owned farms triggered a collapse of the agriculture sector and hyperinflation wrecked the economy.

But every day, about 20 young people gather in Harare Gardens park for a grueling session of dance moves that look straight from a professional American dance studio or film set. Heather Gupo, 21, who joined Elysium four months ago after losing her job with a fast-food chain, said dancing offers her an outlet for her ambitions, despite her family's disapproval.

"I faced a lot of resistance including being beaten up, and locked indoors (by relatives) to try to stop me going to rehearsals," Gupo told AFP. "I have been called all sorts of names, the mildest one being 'bar dancer'. "But dancing is

one thing I am good at, so I decided to pursue it anyway."

Gupo lives with her mother and four siblings, and when money ran short she was forced to give up hopes of studying law at university to take a job as a waitress. Now she helps with decorations at weddings, and works as a make-up artist. The troupe earns occasional fees performing at corporate parties or civil events, but not enough to provide the dancers with a regular income. Instead the intense practice sessions provide an essential release for youths frustrated by life in Zimbabwe under President Robert Mugabe, 91, who has ruled since independence in 1980.

Channeled frustration

"As they dance they express themselves," said dance leader Hillary Tandi Chin'ono, who instructs the group by barking military-style orders and is addressed as the "chief commander". "There are some who are very bitter with disappointment in their lives, so they channel their energy towards dance and express that bitterness, that anger.

"After they have left rehearsals, they are too tired to think of anything else so they will go home to relax instead of sitting on bridges taking drugs." Daves Guzha, Zimbabwe's most famous theatre director, likened the emergence of new dance groups to how the hip-hop movement grew as a mode of expression for disillusioned black youth in the United States.

"Like hip-hop, it's about the kids," Guzha said. "In an environment like we have at the moment where there are no jobs, we are bound to see more of the dance groups trying to get more professional. "Ultimately, perhaps it is going to produce gems from the talent that's will come out." One regular date for Elysium is the annual street carnival organized by the tourism ministry to try to lure tourists to Zimbabwe.

Competition between rival dance groups is fierce, and standards are high. "It is not easy, but Elysium has opened closed doors in my life. I had financial problems in 2013. That's when I started taking dance seriously," Marlon Magondo, 23, said. "Things are hard these days so one can only survive by doing as many things as possible. I also work a bit as a singer and gymnastics instructor.

"I decided to try dancing since it was the only thing I could do to get a bit of money without first going to college." The depressed economy has spawned what economists in Zimbabwe have called "a lost generation", waiting and hoping for change when Mugabe dies or loses power. "You find a lot of young people, whether they have passed exams or not, are unemployed," said Plot Mhako, head of the country's biggest contemporary dance even, the Jibilika Dance Festival. "They are faced with a lot of challenges, and some young people find dancing is what they need—an escape." —AFP

K-pop band held at airport as suspected sex workers

All eight members of a new girl K-pop girl band, traveling for an album cover shoot in the United States, were detained at Los Angeles airport on suspicion that they might be sex workers, their agency said yesterday. The eight member band, Oh My Girl, were held for 15 hours on Thursday before being released, after which they flew back to South Korea.

Their agency WM Entertainment released a statement saying the LA immigration authorities had gone through the

band's costumes and props. "Then, probably because of their young age, they seem to have mistaken them as sex workers," the statement said, without elaborating. The agency said it was taking legal advice in the United States as to whether the band's detention was lawful.

There might also have been an issue with the type of visa the band members were holding, as they were also booked to perform at a gala event in Los Angeles on Saturday. Oh My Girl was only formed in March this year and released its

debut single in April. South Korea's K-pop scene, which has been exported with enormous success across Asia and beyond, is dominated by young girl and boy bands whose members are sometimes as young as 13 or 14 years old.

In 2012, the South Korean authorities took steps to curb over-sexualized performances threatening to slap R-ratings on films, music videos and TV shows that placed an exaggerated sexual emphasis on young singers and bands they featured. —AFP