

**MINIMUM WAGE SHOULD BE MUCH MORE THAN K200,000!
FOOD BASKET IS NOW K272,810**

The recent repeat by President Chiluba of his concern that the minimum wage for civil servants should be at least K200,000 is commendable but not fully adequate.

This is a judgement based upon the latest "food basket" released today by the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR). Alex Muyebe, coordinator of the Economic and Social Development Research Project of JCTR said that for the month of March the estimated food basket for a family of six in Lusaka was K272,810, up K7490 since February and up almost K20,000 since March 1999. [See attached Survey.]

In his Friday 31 March press conference, the President lamented the inability of government to have honoured his promise of last year to increase salaries to K200,000, because of pressures from the IMF. He stated that trade unions were currently negotiating for a break-through in this impasse.

But the fact that the "food basket" of basics – which does not include housing, water, electricity, fuel, transport, clothing, education, health care, recreation, etc. – is already edging upwards towards K300,000 shows dramatically the inadequacy of a K200,000 minimum mark. Muyebe pointed to the fact that two bed-roomed housing in medium density areas was around K200,000 and ZESCO bills could add another K100,000.

"If a primary school teacher or a secretary in the civil service or a nurse or a police officer takes home a net pay slip showing only K100,000, what possibility is there of decent and sustainable livelihood in their family?" asked Muyebe.

The sharp increase in petrol prices last week will mean additional increased costs across the board, said Muyebe. Without seriously addressing the rising cost of living for families, the already high poverty levels – 73% of the Zambian population – will go up even higher and suffering continue to increase in highly dangerous trend.

The JCTR joins with other NGOs like Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) in calling for a concerted effort by government, donors and civil society to meet the poverty challenge. "It's a matter of priorities," said Muyebe; "Political rhetoric must be replaced by concrete strategies that result in effective deeds."