

JUDICIAL SERVICE COMMISSION

“A Zimbabwe in which world-class justice prevails!”



**WELCOME REMARKS BY
THE HONOURABLE MR JUSTICE LUKE MALABA,
CHIEF JUSTICE OF ZIMBABWE**

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE OFFICIAL LAUNCH OF
VIRTUAL COURTS ON 7 FEBRUARY 2022**

~

Salutations,

It is my great pleasure to address you all at this remarkable event that signifies the commissioning of the first-ever virtual courts in Zimbabwe.

Less than a month ago, on the occasion of the official opening ceremony for the 2022 Legal Year, I adverted to the efforts that the JSC had undertaken to adapt and transform the administration of justice through the **Integrated Electronic Case Management System (IECMS)**. I further mentioned that virtual courts will be set up in all the ten Provincial Magistrates' centres and the High Court, and notably that the necessary equipment had already been installed at Harare Magistrates' Court, Harare Remand Prison, Chikurubi Maximum Prison, and the Harare High Court. I can also advise that since then, virtual courts have been installed at Chinhoyi Court Complex, Bindura Magistrates' Court and Marondera Magistrates' Court as well as in the respective prisons in those provinces. This is an ongoing exercise which will see the installation of equipment across the 10 provinces. The ultimate goal is have every court in Zimbabwe installed with virtual court equipment. As I stated, the launch of virtual courts was

rather imminent in light of the disruptive effects that COVID-19 pandemic is having in our lives and court operations.

Honourable Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, the digitisation of courts, particularly carrying out virtual hearings has many advantages both to the courts and the litigating public. Matters are finalised expeditiously and there is the added advantage of participating in the court proceedings in the comfort of your home or office. The first institution to benefit on the virtual court hearing platform is the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Services. Thousands of inmates are housed in prisons throughout the Country. These inmates are expected to appear before the courts regularly for routine remands and trials. The pandemic has at times caused inmates not appear before the courts as required because of the restrictions imposed to combat the spread of Covid 19. Through the virtual hearing platform, it is no longer necessary for them to appear physically in court. They can interact with the court virtually whilst they are at prison. They can even make an application for bail virtually. The costs associated with transporting prisoners to and from courts are also done away with.

When court proceedings are held virtually, it is convenient not only to the court officials including judicial officers, but also to the litigating public and others who do not need to travel to court but can easily follow the proceedings in the comfort of their homes. The digitisation of courts is the way to go as it is now part of international best practices. We cannot afford to be left behind. Videoconferencing, the alluring absence of the physical presence of litigants, and the e-courthouses which are inherent in a virtual court system represents the new character of judicial proceedings. In keeping with its novelty, the idea of remote participation in court proceedings is not only transformative of the usual modes of conducting judicial business but is also cost-effective. For this reason, other progressive jurisdictions have similarly and already adopted virtual courts particularly due to the untoward outbreak of the pandemic. These include South Africa, Kenya, Rwanda, Gambia, India and England. I must add that these countries have recorded astounding benefits in their administration of justice by merely introducing virtual courts – the foremost being the containment and reduction of case backlogs.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, the Judiciary continues to make preparations in earnest for the coming of the ‘new normal’, which is courts digitisation. We are busy procuring various forms of equipment required for courts digitisation. We have started testing the **IECMS** in the Constitutional Court and Supreme Court. Our members of staff including judicial officers are currently undergoing rigorous and comprehensive training to keep them abreast with the operation of computers and computer-based equipment that is employed in virtual courts. Last week alone, Judges attended a training programme on computer and related operations. I am aware that training for other players in the justice sector will be starting very soon.

Allow me also **Ladies and Gentlemen,** to acknowledge the contribution of various players in government and outside government who have partnered with us to ensure that we are able to introduce virtual hearings in the courts. The UNDP and the Government of Zimbabwe through Treasury have provided funding to JSC to purchase equipment and train our staff including stakeholders; this is greatly appreciated. The Ministry of Justice Legal and Parliamentary Affairs

and other government institutions together with the Law Society of Zimbabwe continue to co-operate and support us as we carry out such noble and important endeavours that are meant to enhance the administration of justice in this jurisdiction. The Ministry of ICT has been of immense assistance in carrying out trainings for our members of staff.

With these few remarks I say, thank you for being part of the commissioning of the first virtual courts in Zimbabwe. I hope that throughout the commissioning ceremony and even after the ceremony, you will share in our joys and aspirations of building a justice system that is accessible to all people, regardless of their location. As the proceedings unfold, I invite all of you to feel part of and revel in this unique development of the first virtual courts in this jurisdiction.

I welcome you.

HON. MR. JUSTICE LUKE MALABA

CHIEF JUSTICE OF ZIMBABWE

7 FEBRUARY 2022