PRESS STATEMENT
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

05 November 2026

CRD DEMANDS IMMEDIATE CESSATION OF EMERGENCY RIVER REHABILITATION PROGRAMME TO ADDRESS OPACITY, PLUNDER, AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION

MUTARE, ZIMBABWE

The Centre for Research and Development (CRD) is deeply alarmed by the arrival of several destructive mining outfits in the Mutare and Chimanimani river systems under the guise of the emergency rehabilitation programme. Fronting Chinese miners, these contractors are scrambling for predatory gold extraction rather than ecological restoration. They are aggressively targeting pristine river confluences and mountain source zones in Penhalonga Valley, Imbeza, and untapped blanket alluvial deposits at Premier Estates, while executing fresh encroachments into the Haroni and Rusitu valleys in Chimanimani.

CRD has historically been a leading voice against illegal riverbed mining, actively rallying local communities to halt these disastrous operations. This sustained community resistance culminated in a landmark High Court victory won by the community of Penhalonga against riverbed mining operations, adding significant pressure on the government to enact Statutory Instrument (S.I.) 188 of 2024, which introduced a comprehensive nationwide ban on riverbed mining. Following the ban, CRD led and submitted a community petition to Parliament seeking the urgent, genuine rehabilitation of the degraded rivers to protect vulnerable populations from environmental health hazards. Although Parliament failed to act on this petition, the current emergency rehabilitation framework was subsequently introduced. It is therefore a profound regression that the hard-won legal protections of S.I. 188 of 2024 and subsequent advocacy for genuine restoration are now being systematically dismantled under the guise of an opaque, state-sanctioned rehabilitation scheme.

While 7 to 13 contractors have formally been assigned portions of the Mutare and Haroni rivers, the actual number of operations on the ground has trebled. Information received by CRD raises serious concerns that politically exposed persons, including senior government officials, are benefiting from opaque contracting arrangements through which lucrative sections of the Mutare and Imbeza rivers are being allocated. This opaque setup, which bypassed public tenders and completely sidelined host communities, has sparked violent turf wars in some sections of the rivers and paralysed regulatory enforcement. Host communities have been reduced to horrified bystanders, watching a long-anticipated environmental clean-up turn into an unprecedented exercise in elite plunder and predatory mining practices. Moreover, Chinese miners partnered by these contractors are notorious for severe environmental devastation, previously leaving trails of destruction under ZimGold (a Belarusian company) in Odzi, Penhalonga and Premier Estates. Some of them have reportedly fronted the Zimbabwe National Army to devastate the Haroni River inside the protected Chimanimani Biosphere Reserve and the Rusitu Valley.

Shocking Discovery: Imbeza Riverbed Mining Under the Pretext of Rehabilitation

CRD recently unmasked extensive commercial gold mining occurring on entirely virgin land at the intersection of the Nyabara and Imbeza rivers. Following a field investigation, Forestry Commission sources revealed they initially stopped the contractors for operating inside the protected Nyabara forestry area without permission and referred them to their head office. Shockingly, instead of halting the project, the contractors successfully secured permission directly from the Forestry Commission's head office in Harare to access Nyabara and mine inside the Imbeza River.CRD is deeply shocked by the decision made by the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Riverine Ecosystems Rehabilitation and Agency to award this contractor permission to rehabilitate in an area where no historical mining degradation exists. This irregular award stands in direct violation of the foundational objective of river rehabilitation, which is legally mandated to address actual riverbed degradation directly threatening national water security, irrigation infrastructure, and agricultural systems.

Furthermore, this operation constitutes a flagrant violation of Statutory Instrument 91 of 2026 (page 1397). It strictly confines rehabilitation activities to riverbeds previously degraded by past episodes of riverbed mining that have been formally mapped and documented by the Environmental Management Agency (EMA). In this province, only the Mutare, Haroni, and Nyamukwarara rivers have been legally mapped by EMA for rehabilitation. CRD is aware that the Imbeza River is absent from this statutory list of rivers earmarked for restoration because it was not degraded by mining. Compounding this concern, CRD has established that the contractor operating in the Imbeza Valley does not appear on the original government shortlist of authorised river rehabilitation partners.

Severe Ecological and Economic Implications

The mining site sits in immediate proximity to the historic La Rochelle Estate, a premier boutique tourism destination managed by the National Trust of Zimbabwe. The resulting environmental degradation directly undermines this historic property, severely jeopardising its world-renowned botanical gardens and status as a tourist haven. Additionally, the illegal diversion of the riverbed and the levelling of century-old trees trigger severe hydrological disruptions. This heavily compromises water safety and downstream availability for nearby commercial forestry operations, such as Border Timbers, and adjacent agricultural estates cultivating high-value export crops.

. **Violations of Statutory Frameworks (S.I. 91 of 2026)**

By operating in total secrecy, the Inter-Ministerial Committee and its contractors have acted in direct contradiction of statutory protections:

- **Total Lack of Citizen Participation**: The preamble and Section 2 (Principle b) of S.I. 91 of 2026 explicitly anchor the emergency framework on Section 73 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, legally mandating "inclusive stakeholder participation" and early engagement with affected groups. S.I. 91 of 2026 does not grant commercial operators an unconditional license to pillage public resources; it establishes statutory rights for riverside residents to mandate consultation and monitor mineral recovery accountability. Operating without local consent completely breaches these statutory provisions.
- **Structural Threats to Local Properties:** Under Section 3(4)(c) and Section 4(1) of the First Schedule, contractors are legally obligated to stabilise eroded areas using specific engineering protocols like

gabions and stone checks. Instead, current shoddy work is actively undermining riverbanks, creating immediate risks of landslides and property destruction for homes built along the contracted rivers.

- **Predatory Mining and Subversion of Legal Permits:** Section 8(2)(a) explicitly states that nothing in the disaster declaration shall be construed as authorising any person to conduct alluvial mining for the primary purpose of mineral extraction. Operators are illegally prioritising gold-rich zones while completely lacking the mandatory Mineral Recovery Permits (MRPs) approved by the Minister of Mines under the Third Schedule. Furthermore, they lack the legally compulsory "social ecology" disciplines required on their teams under the Second Schedule, rendering their operations completely invalid under the law.

Our Immediate Demands:

CRD demands an immediate halt to the emergency rehabilitation programme to thoroughly audit all active contracts, ascertain technical capacities, and dismantle the political opacity fueling violence, unaccountability, and regulatory paralysis. We explicitly demand:

1. **An immediate halt** to the rehabilitation programme until a formal, multi-stakeholder community consultation forum is legally organised.
2. **Immediate public presentation** of all Site-Specific Rehabilitation Management Plans and engineering blueprints demonstrating how local properties and ecosystems will be protected.
3. **Public verification** of valid Mineral Recovery Permits (MRPs) and full, unmasked company ownership registries for all entities currently operating on the riverbeds, as strictly required under Section 3(1)(a) of the Second Schedule.

Conclusion

When the law is respected, an accountable, inclusive rehabilitation program under S.I. 91 of 2026 should enhance aquatic biodiversity, restore natural river dynamics, and ensure fiscal transparency through public registers detailing the value of recovered minerals and monthly weight returns to guarantee state royalties.

CRD, in solidarity with the riverine residents of Mutare, Chimanimani, and all downstream communities, will not stand by as historic milestones like S.I. 188 of 2024 are hollowed out by corruption. We are fully prepared to exercise our rights under Section 5(3)(d)(iv) of S.I. 91 of 2026 to lodge a formal, written grievance directly with the Inter-Ministerial Committee to enforce strict environmental compliance and halt this illicit destruction.

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