**Be warned, we are prone to lightning [Zimbabwe]**

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The ManicaPost

WHILE rains are considered a blessing from God, the downpour deluging most parts of Zimbabwe is sadly coupled with lightning, hail and flash floods which have killed people and reduced properties to debris.

The Meteorological Services Department (MSD) has issued a statement to this effect, and the people of Manicaland should take the warning seriously as the province is susceptible to lightning strikes.

Warned the Met Department: “The thunder- showers may be very violent in some places and accompanied by lightning, strong winds and even hail. The public is advised that it is safer to be indoors during thunderstorms and do not stay under trees as these tend to be natural lightning conductors.”

Sadly, a Mutare student died on her way from writing her last “O” Level exam after she was struck by a lightning bolt, while a house in Chikanga was also struck twice by a bolt of lightning and household property was extensively damaged. In another incident 12 other people in Chimanimani were injured after being struck by lightning bolts.

Manicaland is particularly susceptible to lightning with the Guinness Book of World Records registering that the highest number of people killed by a single lightning bolt occurred in Manicaland when 21 people were killed in Chinamasa village, Mutasa, on December 23, 1975.

At least 24 000 people die from lightning strikes each year around the world — the majority of them in developing countries. The least number of victims are in Europe, where lightning kills a tiny fraction of the population each year — about 0,2 people for every one million.

In Africa the lightning deaths can be 100 times higher. In Zimbabwe, it is around 20 per one million. While lightning may seem to strike and kill at random, it is mostly a problem of the poor.

Nearly 90 percent of buildings in Manicaland are simple mud and brick with thatch or sheet metal roofs held down by rocks, which make their inhabitants vulnerable to lightning injury or death.

High altitude, high humidity and high temperatures combine to affect the density of the air and thus the ease with which lightning can occur.

Many lightning victims would be sitting or sleeping on the ground in their huts when struck and the fertile soils in Manicaland also play a role in causing the lightning deaths.

A lot of Zimbabwe’s soil is a poor conductor of electricity, meaning that the charge from a lightning bolt, instead of dispersing evenly, can stream with concentrated force hundreds of yards from the strike point as it follows narrow paths of easy conductivity.

A significant number of people believe lightning is a powerful voodoo or black magic tool that can be sent by the offended to strike and kill their target in order to settle personal scores.

However, scientists contend that thunderstorms are caused by rapidly rising and falling air currents and the friction from this moving air creates electrical charges within a cloud. Water droplets and ice pellets fall, carrying charged electrons to the lower portion of the cloud, where a negative charge builds. A positive charge builds up near the top of a cloud. When the negative charge in the cloud becomes great enough — it seeks an easy path to the positively charged ground below. Dispelling lightning myths is critical to promoting lightning safety. Basic lightning precautions must be implemented to stop unnecessary loss of lives.

Before industrialisation in developed countries, lightning most commonly killed people asleep on their beds in their homes. That does not happen anymore because if lightning strikes a home, there is enough wiring and plumbing for the electricity to ground out.

But in rural Zimbabwe, a significant number of families still live in thatched huts which are not wired to resist high electricity currents. As a lightning countermeasure, huts must be encircled with a ring of wire to provide some low resistance path to lightning currents.

In developed countries, people work outdoors less, and so are at less risk of being caught in a storm and killed unlike in Zimbabwe where many depend on subsistence farming and are outdoors more.

People should not take refuge under trees as these tend to be natural lightning conductors. In the same vein, people should also avoid using headphones when it is raining. The advice from experts is that the public is safer indoors during thunderstorms. We should all take the advice seriously.