**Zimbabwe: Fertile Ground for Lightning**

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HARARE, Zimbabwe — The rainstorms that nourish Zimbabwe's rich soil from October to April also give the country one of the world's highest death tolls from lightning strikes.

"High altitude, high humidity and high temperatures combine to affect the density of the air and thus the ease with which lightning can occur," explained Max van Olst, a lecturer in the University of Zimbabwe's electrical engineering department.

He is researching the reasons for Zimbabwe's high lightning death rate and is trying to find ways to reduce it.

Experts predict that at least 150 Zimbabweans will be killed by lightning before the current rainy season ends in April.

Most victims are peasants living in thatched huts in rural areas, the government says.

Mariah Tambo and her month-old son, Obert, were among the victims. They were beside a cooking fire as a summer storm lashed their thatched-roof mud hut and lightning struck it.

Van Olst said his findings indicate that many victims are sitting or sleeping on the ground in their huts when struck.

(According to the Guinness Book of World Records, the most people killed by a single lightning bolt occurred in Zimbabwe when 21 people were killed in the eastern highlands village of Chinamasa on Dec. 23, 1975.)

Van Olst said he has discovered that Zimbabwe's fertile soil plays 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," he said.