

In Zimbabwe, Homeless Belie Leader's Claim

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BULAWAYO, [Zimbabwe](#) - President [Robert G. Mugabe](#) has one word for reports that Operation Drive Out Trash, the urban-demolition campaign aimed at slum dwellers that his government describes as a civic beautification program, has rendered thousands of his impoverished citizens homeless.

"Nonsense," he told ABC News in an interview broadcast on Nov. 3. "Thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands. Where are the thousands? You go there now and see whether those thousands are there. Where are they? A figment of their imagination."

Clearly, Mr. Mugabe has not been to Bulawayo.

Just three miles west of the center of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city, Robson Tembo and his wife, Ticole, live in the open air in a small pen, 12 feet by 12 feet, built of deadwood and scrap. Rows of plastic grocery sacks hold the assets they have collected over 72 years.

Five miles north, Nokuthula Dube, 22, her two daughters and two orphaned relatives are squatting in an unfinished two-room house of cinder blocks. During a reporter's recent visit, an unidentified woman lay curled up on the concrete floor of the house's only closet, sleeping.

On the other side of town, Gertrude Moyo, 28, lives with her four children and seven other families in tents, pitched in the bush.

More than simple homelessness binds the three families. Until a few months ago, they all lived in Killarney, a shantytown with an improbable name that had housed Bulawayo's less fortunate citizens since the early 1980's.

Today, Killarney is a moonscape of sunbaked dirt, scrub and burned-out rubble. Last May and June, police officers reduced its huts to wreckage, burned their remains and routed the area's more than 800 residents as part of Operation Drive Out Trash.

"They had iron bars as long as this," Mr. Tembo said of the police, stretching his arms wide. "They demolished part of every hut, and then they told us to destroy the rest."

Mr. Tembo said he refused, and so the police finished the job, leveling his two-room home built of wooden poles and metal walls.

More than five months after the demolitions began, Zimbabwe's government continues to insist that the destruction of 133,000 households, by its own count, was a long-overdue slum-clearance effort that has caused its citizens only temporary inconvenience.

The government contends that most of those made homeless have been relocated to the rural villages where they lived before migrating to the cities, mostly to look for work. Others, it says, will be placed in thousands of new homes being built to replace the illegal huts that have been razed.

Mr. Mugabe has rejected the United Nations' attempt to raise \$30 million to aid the victims of Operation Drive Out Trash on the ground that Zimbabwe has no crisis. Despite a public appeal by Secretary General [Kofi Annan](#) on Oct. 31, the government so far has rejected any assistance that implies that its evicted citizens are in distress.

Yet many are in great distress. Relying on the estimates of Zimbabwe's government, the United Nations says 700,000 people were displaced by the May and June demolitions and a later campaign, Operation Going Forward, No Turning Back, in which police officers routed those who tried to return to the cities and rebuild.

An August survey of more than 23,000 Zimbabwean households by the South Africa-based advocacy group ActionAid International places the number of those made homeless as high as 1.2 million - more than 1 in 10 Zimbabweans.

Where many have gone is a mystery. The government carted thousands to holding camps that were later disbanded, and transported thousands more by trucks into the countryside and left them there, ostensibly near their rural homes. Those people are registered with local officials, but almost certainly, they are but a fraction of the total.

In the Nkayi district, a vast expanse of bush terrain north of Bulawayo with 110,000 people, fewer than 700 families are known to have been relocated, according to church officials involved in assisting them.

Similarly, the government's home-building plan has fallen far short of its promises and of the demand. Mr. Mugabe pledged three trillion Zimbabwe dollars for construction in July - about \$30 million in American dollars, and dropping steadily given Zimbabwe's 400 percent inflation rate. But the national treasury is all but bare, and in Bulawayo, where 1,000 homes were promised in short order, fewer than 100 are being built.

So where are the homeless?

"This remains what I'd call an invisible humanitarian crisis - invisible to international eyes, the reason being that those who were displaced have been dispersed," said David Mwaniki, who oversees ActionAid's work in Zimbabwe.

Many are probably with relatives; a few have fled the country. Others are in the bush, surviving off the kindness of neighbors. Many more have vanished into hovels and tents and half-built houses.

The United Nations says 32,000 of Bulawayo's 675,000 residents lost their homes and were ordered to leave the city during the demolition campaign; city officials put the number at 45,000. Torden Moyo, who directs an alliance of local civic groups called Bulawayo Agenda, says there is no doubt where they have gone.

"Ninety-five percent are now back," he said. "They're still struggling, still homeless, still penniless, still shelterless. They've been made refugees in their own country."

Killarney is proof of that. Before the demolitions, it was dirt-poor but thriving, subdivided into three villages with stores and services. All that has been razed and burned. Northeast of town, not far off the road to Bulawayo's airport, Nokuthula Dube, her own children and an orphaned niece and nephew share the two rooms of a half-finished home. Ten stunted cornstalks and some greens grow in a makeshift plot outside, but the five live on donated cornmeal from a nearby church.

Ms. Dube returned from her niece's school in June to find her home in Killarney's Village One wrecked and on fire. Homeless and pregnant, she lost her housecleaning job in a nearby suburb. Her husband, Nomen Moyo, had to move away to keep his job as a gardener. Ms. Dube said she and the children walked for a week, sleeping by the road, before finding the shell where they now live.

In September, Ms. Dube had a daughter, Mtokhozisi. She left her 3-year-old daughter, Nomathembe, and the two orphans - 10-year-old Pentronella and 14-year-old Kevin - alone while she gave birth in a local hospital. She walked home from the hospital with her newborn. "I left in the morning," she said, "and arrived around 3."

A few weeks ago, a man who said he was the house's owner appeared. "He wants us to leave," she said. "He's claiming that this is his house."

Asked where they would go, she said, "Only God knows."

Across town, Gertrude Moyo, who lived in Killarney for 23 years before being driven out on June 11, lives in a 10-foot-by-15-foot tent with her four children. Her husband died a year ago. She said the police first took the family to a transit camp for the homeless, then to the tent. Mrs. Moyo said she was told to wait for a new home.

In fact, the government is building a row of houses next to her tent, and says they are for victims of the demolitions. But Ms. Moyo said the police had told her that her family was going not to a new home, but to a plot of farmland north of town.

Robson Tembo and his wife drifted from one church to a second, then to a succession of relatives' homes before finally returning in late September to Killarney's Village Three. They built their scrap-metal enclosure not far from the two-room home in which they once lived, and which the police had razed in May.

Once a miner, Mr. Tembo is now too infirm to walk very far, much less work. A son who cleans houses gives the couple maize; a second sometimes brings money.

Mr. Tembo's great worry, he said, is that the police, who cruise up and down Killarney's main dirt road, will evict the couple again. "I'm from Malawi," he said. "But if they tear down this hut of mine, I will stay here, because I have nowhere to go in Malawi."

Local church workers, who have assumed much of the burden of finding and caring for the homeless here, say that about 240 of Killarney's residents have returned, many living in the sort of scrap-metal lean-to's that the Tembos cobbled together.

Down a dirt path, past the charred remains of huts in what was once Killarney Village Two, Mhulupheki Tshuma, 29, his wife, Ncadisani, and their 20-month-old son survive by scavenging plastic containers and collecting white pebbles, which Mr. Tshuma sells as decorations for graves. Two other children have been sent to live with relatives elsewhere in town.

Mr. Tshuma was born here, and his parents died here. The family lived in a two-room mud hut when the police arrived in early June and burned it down. "The only thing I took out," Ms. Tshuma said, "was the children."

After wandering for three months, they returned on Sept. 4 and built a hovel. The police demolished it on Sept. 29. Now they live in the open air, their living space bounded by knee-high mud walls and pieces of rubbish.

Mr. Tshuma said the police returned early this month and beat him roundly, telling him he had to leave. But that is impossible. "We came here," he said, "because we didn't have anywhere else to go."

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