

ZIMBABWE: Picking up the pieces after Operation Cleanup

Irin News

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BULAWAYO, 17 Aug 2005 (IRIN) - One early morning in June, Mthulisi Ndiweni, 55, suddenly found himself homeless. Government bulldozers rumbled into the squatter camp of Kilarney on the outskirts of Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo, and tore it down.

Ndiweni and his family of five, along with a thousand other unemployed or low-income earners in Kilarney, had become local victims of the government's much-criticised Operation Murambatsvina (Drive out Trash) - a nationwide programme ostensibly aimed at urban renewal, which left more than 700,000 people homeless and jobless.

The families in Kilarney had been unable to afford rentals in Bulawayo, and throwing up a wooden-sided hut without planning permission or access to official water and electricity connections was their only option if they wanted a chance to find work.

"We were angry, but because the police officers were armed, there was nothing we could do. We just watched the bulldozers destroying our houses ... I remember one police officer dragging an ill man, who used to be my neighbour, out of his hut before setting it on fire. The officers were generally not sympathetic to anyone," Ndiweni recalled.

After spending two weeks at the mercy of the winter chill with a dozen other people who had also been displaced by the cleanup operation, Ndiweni relocated to a church in the city, where he was offered sanctuary by a multi-denominational coalition.

The respite didn't last: he and his family were moved again by the police, this time to a holding camp to await relocation to Ndiweni's rural home - in line with the government's insistence that all squatters should leave the urban areas.

However, like many other Zimbabweans, Ndiweni was born in town and had no recollection of any rural roots; his family, along with four others, was transported from the holding camp to Tshitatshawa, a rural village in northern Zimbabwe, and dumped at a shopping centre.

"They told us to locate traditional leaders of the area and ask for pieces of land where we could set up homesteads and live. The police also threatened to kill us if we ever returned to the city," he told IRIN.

Ndiweni said the villagers initially considered them with suspicion and traditional leaders were reluctant to accept them, but attitudes have changed and the new settlers are now picking up the pieces of their lives.

"The villagers thought we were thieves who wanted to steal from their homes, but when we explained our plight they became sympathetic and gave all of us land to build homesteads," he said.

Rural suspicions of outsiders are often fuelled by the popular beliefs that people from the cities make ends meet by brewing beer and sex work. "They set standards (social and cultural) that we have to stick to," Ndiweni noted.

Although his family is getting back on its feet, many challenges remain. "There are no jobs here, and food is in short supply in shops - where it is available, it is very expensive and we can't afford it," he pointed out.

"At the moment we are eating food that was donated to us by church leaders who helped us while we were still in Bulawayo. They promised to bring some more for us, and we just hope that they do so before this gets finished."

Zimbabwe is facing serious food shortages due to recurring droughts and the government's fast-track land redistribution programme, which disrupted agricultural production and slashed export earnings.

Relief agencies estimate that 4.5 million people, especially those in the rural areas, are in need of food aid, but the government is yet to make a formal appeal for humanitarian assistance from the international community.

Aided by a host of NGOs, local churches have played a central role in donating food to victims of Operation Murambatsvina.

Pastor Albert Chatindo, spokesperson for the churches in Bulawayo, told IRIN that they had tracked down more than 1,000 people dispersed in rural Matabeleland, a vast region in southwestern Zimbabwe, and were assisting them with food and other relief items.

"These people need our support now more than ever before, and we feel it is our duty as the church to come to their rescue," said Chatindo. "We distribute maize-meal, cooking oil, dried fish, sugarbeans and nutritional porridge for those with little children; we also distribute seeds so that when rains fall they can plant crops and be self-reliant."

However, he pointed out that many of the displaced were still battling for acceptance by their new host communities. "[Sometimes] traditional leaders are reluctant to give some of them land to build homes and such people are being kept by well-wishers at their homes."

Thulani Ngwenya, a village head in Tshitatshawa, said although villagers in his area were sympathetic to the new arrivals, he had also heard of some communities that were resisting their integration.

When the government embarked on the relocation exercise, it assured the displaced that they would be met by chiefs and village heads, who would provide them with land and food.

Chatindo noted that the relocated families he had met were not getting any relief assistance from the government.

Local government minister Ignatius Chombo told IRIN the government was in the process of setting up a taskforce to distribute relief aid to displaced people.

"As far as I know, all is well out there; people were met by chiefs, as per our order, and are being given land to settle," said Chombo. "Each family is being given a bucket of maize after a certain period of time and, really, I don't think it would be fair for anyone to say these people are not being catered for by government."