

From IRIN News (UN)

Zimbabwe: Man-made tsunami engulfs urban poor

HARARE, 21 Jul 2005 (IRIN) - The physical evidence of the scale of destruction in Zimbabwe's informal settlements is plain to see: row upon row of what were once the homes of the urban poor demolished by government bulldozers or the bare hands of the residents on the orders of the police.

What is less clear are the numbers of people affected nationwide by Operation Murambatsvina ('Clean Out Garbage') - colloquially known more evocatively as "the tsunami."

Since it began in the capital, Harare, in mid-May, the humanitarian community in Zimbabwe estimates that 75,000 households have been struck - a total of around 375,000 people. The figures are based on assessments by churches and the Zimbabwe Red Cross, who are providing limited assistance to the displaced.

The government's figures are more confusing: overall numbers affected are put at 133,000 households, which would translate to 665,000 individuals; but when the figures presented for each province are calculated, the total number of households falls to 85,000, or 425,000 people.

Operation Murambatsvina began as a blitz on unlicensed street markets and traders "to rid the capital of illegal structures, businesses and criminal activities." It quickly expanded to encompass unapproved housing and illegal extensions to homes owned or rented by the poor across the country, with armed police deployed to enforce eviction orders and government officials insisting that the victims return to their rural home areas.

MY NEW HOME IS A TENT

Beyond the numbers are the individual tragedies of people swept away by the suddenness and scale of the operation. Four weeks on, 34-year-old Oscar Mutume*, a former security guard and father of three, was still visibly shaken by the experience, and concern for his family's future.

He had been living in Hatcliffe Extension, 20 km north of Harare, a settlement that had received the official blessing of the government, with a water supply system funded by the World Bank. It had "decent shelter, toilets, a clinic, shops and was near the bus terminus," said Mutume.

Hatcliffe was established in 1993, when the government settled people evicted a year earlier from the farm of an opposition leader who had allocated them free stands. Residents were granted stands and leases from 2000 onward, but because some were unable to afford permanent structures and connection to services, the authorities deemed them illegal - even though most of the homeowners had been paying fees to the city council.

For the past three weeks, Mutume's home has been a two-by-two metre hovel made of donated plastic sheeting at Caledonia Farm, a holding camp for the displaced 15 km east of Harare. His children are out of school, he fears the authorities may force him to move again and, after missing the monthly distribution of relief food by the World Food Programme, his own small supply of pumpkins and maize-meal is running out.

"I'm not settled in my mind," said Mutume, arms crossed, head bowed. When the police first came to Hatcliffe Extension they told residents to remove the roofing and wooden sidings from their homes, which they burnt. For a week, Mutume and his family slept out in the open, in the cold of mid-winter, until the police returned. "They said 'We don't want to see anybody here', and put us on a transport and drove us here."

He was forced to sell some of his belongings at knockdown prices, but still frets over the goods, like his plastic sheeting, that he had to leave behind. To an unemployed security guard this represents an investment, and he insists he will not leave Harare without it.

More than 4,500 people shelter on the sloping farmland of Caledonia, many of them originally from Hatcliffe. Some have been there for as long as a month - in what was supposed to be a transit stop lasting only a few days -

relying on basic services supplied by the UN and NGOs, including food, water, sanitation and blankets.

On Thursday the Minister of Local Government Ignatius Chombo, and Minister of State for Policy Implementation Webster Shamu, visited Caledonia and announced the camp would close. Those with lease agreements at Hatcliffe, or had been allotted stands at new government developments, had been paying dues to registered housing cooperatives, or could prove they had jobs in Harare, would be allowed to return to their communities. Everybody else would be removed to their rural areas.

"Those people from Hatcliffe are going back to a worse situation - not only have their houses been destroyed, but also the services. What about the water? What about the sanitation?" asked one aid worker. The demolition at Hatcliffe included an orphanage and an AIDS centre.

While Caledonia appears set to close, the police in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, raided church compounds on Wednesday night where 300 displaced were sheltering, and transported them to the official holding camp at Hellensvale. [See separate story: [Police forcibly remove homeless from church compounds](#)]

In Mutare and Odzi in eastern Manicaland, the police were also this week clearing former commercial farm labourers who had squatted on land belonging to newly settled farmers, humanitarian officials said.

Not far from Caledonia is Belapezi Farm, a new section of Epworth, an established settlement on church land that had existed before independence. In 2001, the commercial farm was taken over by ruling party supporters encouraged by the government as part of its controversial land reform programmed, and stands were distributed through a housing cooperative.

It is extremely cold in the evenings and when IRIN visited, Bertina Ndlovu was sheltering behind a low wall built from salvaged bricks, warming herself by a small fire, a nine-month-old baby strapped to her back. It was dark and eerily quiet; Ndlovu said she was a little scared, as her husband, with a job in town, would not be back until around 8.00 pm, "depending on transport" - a reference to the country's crippling fuel shortages.

There were 500 families at Belapezi, but only 350 have hung on since the police ordered the demolition of their houses on 16 June. "We have no alternative place to live - this is our home - we have never been established in the rural areas," she said.

Ndlovu, a young woman in her twenties, explained that the police had initially ordered them to leave the area, "but then we heard we could stay, and wait and see what the housing cooperative could do ... We'll leave this place only after being told of a final decision on whether we'll be given alternative accommodation".

The official rationale for Operation Murambatsvina was that unplanned and illegal housing had placed an enormous burden on water and sewerage systems, and were a health hazard. President Robert Mugabe told parliament in June the "vigorous cleanup campaign" was to restore "sanity and order in urban and other areas."

Lawyer and opposition shadow economic minister Tendai Biti countered that the programmed was an attack on the poor, made no sense in an economy with only 20 percent formal employment, and was illegal in Zimbabwean law.

Although an injunction to halt the demolitions was rejected by a high court judge, Biti insisted that the evictions clearly flouted legal requirements obliging local authorities to apply to a housing court for an eviction order, and ignored the tenants' right of appeal.

According to the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, many of those whose homes had been destroyed held valid lease agreements. Eyewitnesses told IRIN that in some instances the police had not consulted city-planning maps and had ordered the demolition of property at their own discretion.

ACCOMMODATION CRISIS OF URBAN POOR

Zimbabwe, with a population of 11.5 million, has a housing backlog of around 2 million units. In 2002, the Harare city council had a waiting list of 300,000, with people expected to renew their application each year.

But acquiring a stand is not the end of the problem for the urban poor, analysts point out. Interest rates are around 200 percent, building permission requires paying for costly architectural plans, while proper construction materials are extremely expensive.

As a result, the hard-up have taken to living where they can: illegal extensions to existing property rented out per room; crowded backyard shacks and brick-built "cottages."

The authorities had "previously done little to enforce the building by-laws in relation to these informal settlements," said a report on Operation Murambatsvina by the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum.

Along with turning a blind eye to building code infringements, the government had also tolerated the informal sector as Zimbabwe's economic decline accelerated from the late 90s. Some of the markets razed and torched by the police - which had provided livelihoods for many of those now displaced - had previously been opened by government officials.

Harare has more than 10 major informal settlements. According to the Combined Harare Residents Association, prior to the cleanup, over half of the city's estimated three million residents were living in makeshift accommodation.

One of the oldest informal settlements is Porta Farm, 18 km west of the city centre, and home to some of Zimbabwe's poorest and most vulnerable citizens.

It was meant to have been a temporary camp for accommodating the homeless cleared out of the capital by the image-conscious authorities when Queen Elizabeth II visited Harare to open the Commonwealth Heads of State and Government Meeting in 1991.

Fourteen years later, the 7,500 residents have still not been officially recognised as a community, compounding their squalor: there are no government-run health facilities, electricity or piped water; instead, NGOs provide basic services.

More than half the households affected by the government's demolition between 27 and 29 June are still living out in the open amid the wreckage of their homes; some have taken to burrowing into the clay soil as protection from the cold and rain. The area looks like the aftermath of urban combat.

Regardless of the conditions, community leader Felistas Chinuku said she was staying put at Porta Farm. The community had won two court orders in 1995 and 2004 against their eviction and, through Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, was now suing the police commissioner and the authorities for damages arising out of the destruction of the settlement.

"We're staying here until they give us homes," she said firmly.

IMPACT ON THE VULNERABLE

The response by people affected by Operation Murambatsvina has, inevitably, been mixed. Some have preferred to stay put in their neighbourhoods, hoping the government will change its policy, or are unable to afford transport; others have moved in with family and friends, or found alternative accommodation and are prepared to pay the inflated rents demanded by landlords.

An unknown number have gone back to what officials insist every Zimbabwean should have - a rural home.

But, like many other Zimbabweans, 25-year-old Tabitha Mbayi does not have roots in the rural areas. She was born in Harare, lived in Hatcliffe, and her parents are with her in Caledonia Farm where her second child, Kudakwashi (God's will), was born two weeks ago.

She does have grandparents in Morewa, 60 km northeast of Harare, but doesn't think they would welcome her

family, as the rural areas are struggling to cope with yet another poor harvest that threatens 4.5 million people with hunger.

And there is another problem: the grandparents would expect her to stay with her husband's relatives, and although he was also born in Harare, his parents were originally from Malawi, a common genealogy in a region with historically strong migration patterns.

An assessment by the UN in conjunction with the government and NGOs to determine the humanitarian impact of the forced evictions finally began this week. Five locations in Harare, Bulawayo, Victoria Falls, Mutare and Kariba were chosen to gauge conditions and map potential needs.

The assessment follows a two-week visit this month by the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy, Anna Tibaijuka, who has presented her report to Kofi Annan. UN spokesperson Marie Okabe said on Monday: "The Secretary-General is increasingly concerned by the human rights and humanitarian impact of the recent demolitions of what the government of Zimbabwe has called 'illegal settlements'."

In Zimbabwe, the humanitarian community is especially alarmed at the impact of the demolitions on the vulnerable - child-headed households, the elderly, the infirm and people infected with HIV.

According to one NGO helping with rural orphans, although the most direct impact of Operation Murambatsvina has been felt in urban areas, there has been a ripple effect in the countryside.

"Particularly on access to education," noted an aid worker, who asked not to be named. "Children often go to school in urban or peri-urban areas and lodge there during the week. Inevitably the lodging is in cheap accommodation, which has been affected."

REVERSING AIDS PREVENTION GAINS

In Zimbabwe 21 percent of the adult population is HIV positive, down from 25 percent in 2003. While the destruction by the police of the AIDS centre in Hatcliffe, which helped 600 people, dramatically underlined the plight of those living with the virus, for most Zimbabweans the HIV/AIDS repercussions of the forced removals will be more insidious.

Bertha Matema, 45, is HIV-positive and a volunteer home-based care worker at The Centre, an HIV/AIDS NGO with 4,500 registered clients. She had lived in Westlea, 7 km west of Harare, but has now moved to Dzivaresekwa, further out of the city, after being homeless for the past month.

Of the 11 people she was responsible for in the Westlea area, she can only trace six, and because of the distance she has to travel from Dzivaresekwa, is no longer able to keep in contact. Bertha said she was suffering from stress and high blood pressure - major accelerators of the virus. "It's like killing people; it's like finishing them off."

Lynde Francis, who runs The Centre, is in no doubt that, as a result of the clean-up campaign, successes made in fighting HIV/AIDS will be irrevocably set back.

"We will see an increase in prevalence, an increase in mortality, an increase in resistance to the virus, and we will see a lot more violence against girls and women - it's already happening: husbands beating up their wives because they allowed their houses or tuck shops to be destroyed."

Around 8,000 Zimbabweans are on treatment - 6,000 through a free public programme. The most widely used first-line antiretroviral (ARV) drug regimen is the generic combination therapy, Triomune, which is sensitive to treatment interruption. If a patient becomes resistant to Triomune, the second-line regimen is four times the cost.

In the rural areas, the health services are understaffed, under-resourced and struggle to provide even basic care, Francis noted. ARVs, which require treatment support and a full stomach, are unavailable.

"The main thing [about the clean-up] is that girls are going to be very much more vulnerable now, and the only thing

they have to sell is sex," she said. "They are going to accept less payment and accept no condoms because they are desperate."

ATTACK ON THE OPPOSITION?

While the government has framed Operation Murambatsvina solely in terms of urban regeneration, its critics insist that its goal has been primarily political.

The opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) alleges that it was designed to destroy the party's urban support base, relocate people to the rural areas where they would be under the sway of ruling party-aligned chiefs, and forestall popular protest by the poor as the food crisis deepens.

However, there have been reports of chiefs not wanting to accept the displaced, given the increasing hardships in the countryside, while settlements occupied by former war veterans - staunch ZANU-PF supporters who led the land invasions and represent the radical wing of the party - were also demolished in the cleanup.

Some analysts have suggested that the attack on the informal sector was the result of the government's determination to kill the parallel market and mop up the foreign currency it so desperately needs.

If that were the case, it would be a huge misreading of the significance of the informal sector, said Biti. It is generally agreed that the parallel market used to generate 35 percent of GDP, but the MDC shadow minister suggested the real figure could by now be 60 percent - almost double.

"What's really been supporting the economy has been the informal sector," he said. "They should have regularised it."

Sam Moyo, director of the African Institute for Agrarian Studies, widely regarded as close to the government, has written a paper offering an alternative reading of Operation Murambatsvina.

Although "on the face of it, it was a mess, it shouldn't have happened," he sees the cleanup as the response to three interlinked goals: the reassertion of state authority and the reigning in of radical elements within the party; the regulation of the economy and a crackdown on corruption; and the restoration of functioning services to the cities.

"There was a misreading of the effect, and the execution snowballs into this militaristic thing," he said.

At the end of June, the government announced the end of Murambatsvina and the launch of a Zim \$3 trillion (US \$300 million) Operation Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle ('Stay well') to accommodate the people affected by the cleanup, and construct factory shells and market stalls.

The official Herald newspaper reported that 10,000 housing stands would be developed at White Cliff Farm - which the government expropriated after the owner objected - and had 62 other farms ready for housing development.

But why Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle was not launched before Operation Murambatsvina as part of a strategic programme for low-cost housing and urban renewal, and where the government intends to source the funding for the project, are issues that have been seized on by its detractors.

"In the face of multiple statements condemning events in Zimbabwe, the government now talks hurriedly of vast sums for housing; even if the money were in fact to materialise - and there is no reflection in the existing parliamentary approved budgets that the money is there - it will take years of work to build sufficient houses for the displaced," said a report by Solidarity Peace Trust, an NGO representing Southern African church leaders.

* Certain names have been changed

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