

Zimbabwe: Housing Tsunami Continues

AfricaFocus Bulletin

Jul 28, 2005 (050728)

(Reposted from sources cited below)

Editor's Note

Despite a devastatingly critical report by UN-HABITAT Director Anna Tibaijuka, the government of Zimbabwe is continuing its drive to destroy "illegal" housing and shops that is estimated to have made at least 700,000 people homeless in the last two months. Zimbabweans, rejecting the government's term Operation Murambatsvina ("Clean Out Garbage") compare the assault on the country's poor to a "tsunami."

The UN report was careful not to implicate President Robert Mugabe directly in responsibility for the destruction, but said those responsible should be held accountable. Also last week, renowned Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, speaking in South Africa, called for African leaders to end their reluctance to criticize "rogues and monsters" such as President Mugabe. "Bulldozers have been turned into an instrument of governance and it is the ordinary people who are suffering," he said, "it is a disgrace on the continent."

This AfricaFocus Bulletin contains a short update from the UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks, and a background analysis and critique by Zimbabwean human rights activist Mary Ndlovu, that appeared in Pambazuka News earlier this month. The web version of this bulletin, at <http://www.africafocus.org/docs05/zim0507.php>)

also contains the text of the executive summary from Ms. Tibaijuka's report. The full report is available at:

<http://www.un-habitat.org/documents/ZimbabweReport.pdf>

For previous issues of AfricaFocus Bulletin on Zimbabwe, see

<http://www.africafocus.org/country/zimbabwe.php>

For a wide range of reports from Zimbabwe civil society, see

<http://www.kubatana.net>

+++++end editor'snote+++++

Zimbabwe: Evictions Continue Despite International Condemnation

UN Integrated Regional Information Networks

<http://www.irinnews.org>

July 25, 2005

Harare

[This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.]

Ignoring a call by the United Nations to halt evictions of people living in unauthorised housing, Zimbabwean police on Friday ordered residents out of Porta Farm, one of Harare's oldest informal settlements, about 35 km west of the capital.

Since the launch of Operation Murambatsvina ('Clean Out Garbage') in mid-May, the UN estimates that 700,000 people have been made homeless or lost livelihoods as a result of the blitz on the informal homes and unlicensed vending of the largely urban poor.

A report by UN-HABITAT Executive Director Anna Tibaijuka after a two-week fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe recommended that the

evictions, "carried out in an indiscriminate and unjustified manner, with indifference to human suffering", bestopped.

"The government of Zimbabwe should immediately halt any further demolitions of homes and informal businesses and create conditions for sustainable relief and reconstruction for those affected," read the report, presented last week to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The latest police operation at Porta Farm was the second time in a month they had tried to clear the 7,500 settlers from the area. At the first attempt in June, homes and markets were demolished to force people to return to their rural areas, or to a holding camp at Caledonia Farm, 15 km north of Harare, but many of the residents refused to move.

Aid workers said on Monday that the police were determined to clear the remaining people. Residents were being grouped according to place of origin in preparation for their transport out.

The evictions, part of a drive to "clean up" the cities, have been carried out despite the Porta Farm community having won a high court order last year allowing them to stay.

When IRIN visited the settlement on Sunday, around 70 policemen were monitoring the removal of the residents, who are among the poorest and most disadvantaged in Harare.

"We have been camping here since Friday, and we will only go when all the people have been removed. This time our bosses have instructed us not to use force on the settlers," said a police officer - a reference to the death of 11 people when police used

teargas in a bid to evict residents in September last year.

In one corner of the camp, reduced to rubble and heaps of household goods, five young men defiantly beat a drum and danced to an improvised song vowing not to move. Elsewhere, people were packing their belongings into trucks provided by the army and Harare municipality.

"I returned from Caledonia Farm two weeks ago because that place was like a prison for me and my three children," said Tabita Mugomba, a 38-year-old widow.

When the home she had lived in for 10 years was demolished in June, she went to Caledonia but left most of her belongings at Porta.

"Besides, I had to fend for my children, who have since stopped going to school. Here at Porta Farm I had been surviving by selling fish to motorists," said Mugomba, holding the hand of her thin seven-year-old boy.

Mugomba said she would try and move in with her brother and his family in Harare's working-class suburb of Mbare but was unsure about how well she would be received, as she had been out of touch with him for some time.

Porta Farm dates back to 1991, when the government moved thousands of people from unauthorised settlements in Harare; because it was supposed to be temporary, basic amenities like water, schools and health services were never provided.

Tibaijuka's report said Operation Murambatsvina has indirectly affected 2.4 million people, and the humanitarian consequences "are

enormous".

"It will take several years before the people and society as a whole can recover. There is an immediate need for the government of Zimbabwe to recognise the virtual state of emergency that has resulted, and to allow unhindered access by the international and humanitarian community to assist those that have been affected," the report noted.

The government has dismissed the UN's findings as biased. Local Government Minister Ignatius Chombo told IRIN that the people had been evicted from illegal settlements, "and I don't think the UN can sanction illegality".

He stressed that the government's new corrective programme, Operation Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle ('Stay well'), would develop housing at an estimated cost of US \$300 million. "Our people are much happier because the government is giving them land, they are getting stands, and are getting government assistance," Chombo insisted.

On Monday only five families out of the original 4,500 people remained in Caledonia Farm after the authorities moved to close the transit camp at the end of last week. The government said that those without accommodation in urban areas and who were unemployed would be relocated to their rural homes where chiefs were asked to give them land and farming inputs.

Critics have questioned the ability of the cash-strapped government to afford the housing programme's price tag, and pointed to the

immediate needs of the people - especially the young, sick and elderly - displaced by Operation Murambatsvina.

"The government is acting irrationally and hypocritically, because it is causing further suffering to the very people it says it is providing accommodation to," said Welshman Ncube, secretary-general of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change.

Zimbabwe's Tsunami

Mary Ndlovu

Pambazuka News 214

July 06, 2005

<http://www.pambazuka.org/index.php?issue=214>

Mary Ndlovu is a Zimbabwean human rights activist

Operation Murambatsvina - sweep out the trash - has torn through Zimbabwe like a Tsunami, describes Mary Ndlovu. Hundreds of thousands of people have been internally displaced, but the true cost of the government operation on the livelihoods of people is almost impossible to predict. As the G8 meets in Scotland and African leaders conclude an African Union Summit in Libya, Zimbabweans feel that the rest of Africa has turned its back on them.

Towards the end of May a tsunami struck Harare, flattening everything in its path - informal businesses, solidly built homes, shacks, orphanages, churches, even a mosque; it took with it people's lives, livelihoods, family life, their spirit to survive.

Like the Asian tsunami in December, the number of its victims and the total cost of the destruction are hard to quantify; unlike the Asian tsunami, it is man-made and continues in wave after wave of senseless brutality, reaching every corner of this increasingly miserable country.

The government calls it Murambatsvina - sweep out the trash- or Operation Restore Order. But Zimbabweans have rejected the government's term, for they are not trash, and order has not been restored. Only the term "tsunami" adequately portrays the suddenness, the scale and the nature of the catastrophic destruction which has been visited on us - not by erratic nature, but by our own government.

Suddenly, with virtually no warning, police in central Harare descended on informal traders, breaking and burning their stalls, confiscating or destroying their wares, and arresting thousands. By the following week, the attacks had spread throughout Harare and to other urban centres in the country, and the assault on informal housing had begun. Six weeks later, the operation continues. Police of various descriptions move from township to township, ordering residents to destroy their illegal dwellings or have them smashed. Sometimes sufficient warning has been given for people to remove their furniture and salvage some of their building materials, other times the bulldozers are hot on the heels of the police, disrupting funerals, chasing people from their cooking and their bathing. At least six people have been killed directly by the police actions.

Many others, especially babies, the aged and those suffering from AIDS have succumbed to exposure, shock and hunger as they huddle through the cold nights in the rubble of their homes.

Now, in the depth of the winter season, tens of thousands remain camped in the open, dazed and unbelieving. Others, perhaps hundreds of thousands, have moved into the houses of friends or neighbours or relatives, who were already overcrowded, or sleep on verandahs. Thousands are crammed into churches where they have been offered shelter and are being fed; some have managed to sell their furniture to raise the bus fare to go to their rural homes, where they face an uncertain future with no food or housing.

How do we expect them to react when our President tells UN experts that the action is for the good of the people, and they appreciate what has been done for them? Can it ever be for someone's good to destroy their home when you have nothing to replace it with? When you tell them they are rubbish, maggots, who are not wanted? When you cause them the utmost trauma of preventing them from feeding their families? When you destroy the huts of orphans and smash the centres that were caring for them; when you bulldoze a clinic that was providing anti-retrovirals to AIDS patients and tell them to go to rural areas where there are no medicines.

Surely a government which turns so viciously on its own people must be acting in response to a serious threat to its power, an armed rebellion or organised sabotage at least. No. Not at all. That has not happened and government has not mentioned it. The government

says it is seeking to reduce crime and restore order to the cities of Zimbabwe. There has been too much illegal activity and this must be stopped; informal trading venues and illegal dwellings were havens for criminals, foreign exchange dealers, fraudsters; purveyors of stolen property, making once beautiful cities filthy and unsafe. This is a clean-up operation which will catch the criminals, drive the forex back into the banks, and blackmarket goods into legitimate channels.

It is unspeakably depressing to watch government and party leaders trying to defend the indefensible. Raze whole suburbs to catch a few criminals? Deprive people of earning a living to stop thieves? How many more thieves will be created? With a national housing backlog of two million units, bulldoze more than 80,000? Where is the once very professional police force whose training teaches them how to identify and apprehend criminals? Where are the health officials who enforce hygiene standards and the town planners who design orderly housing developments? Why the sudden need to restore beauty to the cities?

Of course it is true that the cities of Zimbabwe have deteriorated during the past ten years. Visitors from other parts of Africa once gawked at Harare, wondering how such a beautiful, orderly municipality could really be African. It was well-planned, most people were in employment, there was little sign of the shanty towns and street traders common in other African metropolises.

But things have changed, for several reasons. First is the

deterioration in standards of government, especially the growth of corruption, which sees by-laws flagrantly ignored for the price of a small bribe, and awarding of contracts to cronies incapable of delivering the services. Second was the effect of the economic decline resulting from the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP), introduced in the early 1990's. Many urban workers lost their jobs, and government encouraged them to turn to the informal sector to create their own incomes, in manufacturing, services and retail trading; councils which resisted were ordered by central government to relax by-laws to accommodate them. Third was the effect of the farm invasions of 2000 and thereafter. On the one hand these produced a flood of displaced farm workers, many of whom crowded into the slums of Harare, and on the other it opened former farmland to be allocated without any planning to loyal supporters of ZANU PF for informal settlement. Fourthly, when the opposition MDC won control of most urban councils between 2000 and 2002, government deliberately undermined their operations, using its powers under the Urban Councils Act to prevent rate increases in line with hyperinflation. Borrowing powers to develop housing and upgrade crumbling infrastructure, especially in water and sewage reticulation, were systematically denied. The decline of Zimbabwe's cities is in large part, therefore, the direct result of government's economic and political mismanagement.

Then suddenly, without consultation, public deliberation, or even the simplest level of information, government declared itself

obsessed with illegality, and determined to eliminate it from Zimbabwe. This seemed strange in view of the fact that it is the government that has been content to ignore legality whenever it threatened to restrict its own operations, flouting court orders in regard to holding of elections, seizures of land, release of detainees from prison, and prosecution of known criminals. But Zimbabweans have come to know that government uses the law when it finds it convenient and abuses it to pursue its political goals.

In this case, the line between legality and illegality has become blurred. Many of the informal traders had licences issued by the local authorities, but many did not. Many of those who did broke the law in other ways, by receiving stolen goods or dealing in foreign currency or black market goods, but most did not. The settlements around Harare which have now been destroyed had the blessing of the highest government authorities, who had allocated stands, arranged in some cases for financing, and publicly encouraged the recipients to build homes. Does this make them legal if the necessary planning laws have been ignored? The people are now being punished for taking government instructions as legality. The cry by government that traders and home-owners were illegal is thus partly correct, and partly not. However, the methods used in carrying out their operation of destruction are clearly not legal. The actions of the police have all been taken without due process, and violate statute law, our constitution, and international law. The Urban Councils Act specifies that an illegal structure can only

be destroyed when notice of 28 days has been given to the owner and occupier and opportunity has been given for a court application; no one was given such notice. The common law does not permit the deprivation of property in the possession of anyone without legal sanction; those who had their buildings and their trading goods destroyed or seized had their property illegally despoiled. The constitution guarantees the right to be protected from arbitrary deprivation of property, and from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Surely destroying one's home and leaving them in the open is cruel and degrading by anyone's estimate. The United Nations Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights provides that everyone has the right to shelter, while the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights has been interpreted, in a case brought against Nigeria, to mean that a government may not evict anyone from his home without providing alternative accommodation. How can our government claim that it is restoring legality, when all the means it is using are quite clearly infringements of the law at every level?

The effects and costs of the operation are certainly too huge to measure. Six weeks since its beginning, the tsunami continues to destroy people's lives. The original estimates of 200,000 to 250,000 persons displaced have by now doubled. The 300,000 school children displaced from schools was given by the Ministry of Education for Harare only, after only two weeks of demolitions. In Mutare, Bulawayo, Victoria Falls, Beitbridge, Harare itself, and

many other towns and cities, countless thousands more have since been affected. A million traders and their families losing their livelihoods will have an immeasurable effect. Of course many will begin again because they simply have to feed their families, legal or not legal. But in total, how much business is being lost for every sector of the economy? And how many of these were sending money and food home to the rural areas. We simply can't know. Perhaps falling back in horror at what they have done in the past weeks, the government has suddenly announced a programme of reconstruction. Thousands of stands will be serviced and houses built over the next three years. Although only four houses have been built in a week, 9,000 are to be ready in two months. This raises more questions than it answers: where will the money come from in a cash-strapped economy? Who will pay for the houses? And most important of all - if government can mobilise the money to build houses, why didn't they do it before smashing down the ones that already existed? The cost of re-housing Indonesian communities affected by the natural tsunami last December is estimated at \$US5 billion for 500,000 still homeless. We have at least that number of homeless people now. Where in our wildest dreams do we imagine we will get funding to rebuild what we have ourselves destroyed? Our economy was already in a state of complete collapse - what some have referred to as meltdown. Rebuilding on this scale is pure delusion.

But as government's efforts at damage control pick up pace, more

themes have emerged. Applicants for new trading licences and allocation of stands will be "vetted" - a term that has not been defined. It is only assumed that they will be checked for criminal records (few will be found) and asked to produce ZANU PF membership cards. Already we are told that the stands at Whitecliff Farm are being reserved for civil servants - police, army and CIO primarily; they are certainly not the people who were displaced. Women arrested for protesting were finger-printed and told they would never get vending licenses again. "Presumptive taxes" will be levied on informal traders, who will pay income tax on "presumed income". While party lackeys wheel and deal and survive on kick-backs and bribes, the struggling poor will provide for the instruments of their own oppression.

Perhaps more sinister, all these processes of "reconstruction" have been removed from the local authorities who legally have responsibility for them. Licences have always been issued by the councils, not by the police. Housing stands have been allocated by the council housing departments. Now we have unknown authorities responsible for allocating these resources. We have new "task forces" controlled by the army assigned to supervise the reconstruction. Clearly, there is an all-out attempt to usurp the designated powers of elected councils completely and emasculate any democratic participation of the people. We are truly heading for a military state, where central government takes everything, leaving no democratic space for anyone else. We are even to have chiefs for

cities, since they will better implement government policies!

Government is no longer by elected officials, answerable to the people. It is by appointees of those clinging to power by the barrel of the gun.

As we struggle to give a rational explanation for these seemingly deranged acts of destruction several points emerge clearly:

1. This is very obviously a pre-emptive assault on urban populations, the stronghold of the opposition, and the potential source of any meaningful threat to ZANU PF's power; its main aim seems to be to forcibly relocate poor people to rural areas by making it impossible for them to live in towns;
2. It is not only an attack on towns, but on informal activities in rural areas as well - wood carvers and sculptors, gold diggers, even fishermen; nor is it an attack only on opposition supporters, as many of ZANU PF's members have also been affected;
3. It seeks to impose government and ZANU PF control on sections of the economy where their grip has slipped in recent years - in the control of foreign exchange rates, the collection of taxes and the determination of who benefits from resource allocation. As such it is a desperate attempt to ensure that the little wealth that remains is channelled through the hands of government, to be spent as they see fit;
4. It is not going to improve the national economy - in fact it will cripple it further, and it will have horrendous consequences on the lives of millions of Zimbabweans, reducing hundreds of

thousands more to penury;

5. It has been undertaken in a typically ZANU PF way -suddenly, violently, illegally and recklessly, without regard to the disastrous consequences;

6. One more very large nail has been hammered into the coffin of Zimbabwean democracy, which is rapidly being replaced by an illegitimate oligarchy amassing wealth for themselves while the people starve, and maintaining their position by military rule.

And Africa turns its back. They do not want to know. We helped South Africans when they were fighting a force too powerful, why do they deny us the same? We do not want to be rescued by the developed world. We want to be rescued by our fellow Africans, understanding our plight and standing by the principles to which they committed themselves in the African Union, the Harare Declaration, numerous international human rights instruments, the SADC and NEPAD. Why do they not care? Why do our pleas fall on deaf ears?

AfricaFocus Bulletin is an independent electronic publication providing reposted commentary and analysis on African issues, with a particular focus on U.S. and international policies. AfricaFocus Bulletin is edited by William Minter.

AfricaFocus Bulletin can be reached at africafocus@igc.org. Please write to this address to subscribe or unsubscribe to the bulletin, or to suggest material for inclusion. For more information about reposted material, please contact directly the original source

mentioned. For a full archive and other resources, see

<http://www.africafocus.org>