

Mugabe denies hundreds of thousands uprooted
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SIRTE, Libya (Reuters) -Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe denied on Tuesday that his crackdown on illegal shantytowns had made hundreds of thousands of people homeless.

"There is no demolition campaign. It's a clean-up operation and that's what all countries do," he said in brief remarks to reporters at an African Union (AU) summit in Libya.

Western countries have been highly critical of Zimbabwe's "Operation Restore Order" -- a six-week police blitz which is estimated to have made 300,000 people homeless.

Mugabe's government says the clean-up campaign is aimed at rooting out black market trading and other criminal activity in poor urban areas.

Asked by a journalist about reports that "hundreds of thousands" of people had been made homeless by the campaign, he replied: "Where are they? We don't know about those. It's just nonsense".

European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso has said Africa must stand with the rest of the world in condemning the crackdown but Zimbabwe has not been on the agenda of the half-yearly gathering of leaders of the 53-member AU.

AU officials last week rejected calls from non-governmental organisations to intervene in Zimbabwe, saying the crackdown was an internal affair.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has called for the United Nations Security Council to debate the housing crackdown and what it says are wider human rights abuses after the head of the U.N. housing agency reports back from a visit to Zimbabwe.

Anna Tibaijuka, the special representative of U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, arrived in Harare on Sunday to assess the situation.

South African President Thabo Mbeki told reporters he had met Annan on the sidelines of the AU summit and agreed that they await Tibaijuka's report before deciding on a course of action.

He said he expected the subject of Zimbabwe to crop up at a meeting of African leaders and the Group of Eight industrialised countries in Scotland this week.

"I would imagine that they would like to raise the situation in Zimbabwe, particularly in relation to Operation Restore Order," Mbeki said.

"We are all awaiting the report from the chief of UN-Habitat who is currently in Zimbabwe making an assessment. We'll await that report, which we will discuss with the Secretary General to see what to do next."

Mbeki said Zimbabwe opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai had also raised the subject during a meeting in Pretoria last week. Tsvangirai, of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), had been concerned about the humanitarian problems caused by the operation.

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