

In God's name', stop Zim evictions

Alex Eliseev | Johannesburg, South Africa

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The Zimbabwean government's demolition of houses and policy of forced removals must be stopped, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) said on Wednesday.

"In God's name, stop Operation Murambatsvina," the SACC central committee concluded after a two-day meeting held in Johannesburg.

During the conference, members reviewed a report drafted by the pastoral mission to Zimbabwe, on July 10 and 11, headed by Anglican Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane.

As an immediate response to the "inhumane" situation in Zimbabwe, the SACC will send a second mission, to be headed by its chairperson, Bishop Ivan Abraham.

Abraham and his team will depart next Monday.

"The central committee received the report with great pain and shock," SACC president Russel Botman said. "This operation is inhumane and causes widespread suffering to the people."

Other action to be taken by the SACC will be to:

- arrange visits to the people affected;
- engage leaders, including political, business, civil and religious organisations;
- increase relief to Zimbabwe; and
- call for solidarity vigils.

"They [the Zimbabwean government] have no idea what to do with the people, and this is the sadness of it," Botman said. "It's not going to stop. It's [the operation] going to go through every city and every town."

He estimated the number of people thrown out on the street to be between 800 000 and one million.

Botman, a member of the visiting delegation, said the visitors did not get a chance to speak to Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe.

The delegation included Catholic Cardinal Wilfred Napier and Rhema pastor Ray McCauley.

During the visit to Zimbabwe, the Caledonia camp, about 30km south-east of Harare, was visited.

"The displaced people informed us they were given 30 minutes to pack their belongings, were loaded on trucks and dumped in the transit camp," the report reads.

"They were told they would be there for five days. By the time the delegation visited, they had been there for a month."

The report described the camp as an inhumane location with no facilities or proper shelters.

"The only existing shelters are plastic sheets supported by pieces of wood."

"Because of the stress, trauma and lack of proper nutrition, mothers are unable to breastfeed their babies. Fathers who are denied the opportunity to support their families are loitering in transit camps, consumed by boredom and despair."

Street people and informal vendors are the main victims of the campaign. A considerable number are second-generation Zimbabweans whose parents and grandparents came from neighbouring countries. Many teenage parents in the camp were seen nursing tiny babies.

Botman said there is a shortage of water in the camps and there is bound to be a shortage of food because the next harvest is not due for eight months.

Churches are providing blankets, tents and food to the 4 890 people in the camp, he said.

The delegation also visited a "shocking site" at Mbare township, which was destroyed in the operation.

"Almost every yard was filled with rubble from the demolition of structures. A considerable number of people who have been living in Mbare for many decades had their homes and informal business structures destroyed," the report reads.

"This is illustrating a looming hunger crisis in Zimbabwe."

Botman said the SACC will show its report to President Thabo Mbeki if given the chance.

"We want to say to the president what the report was and how we got to it," he said. -- Sapa