

More than cricket at stake in Zimbabwe

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Once the food basket of Africa, Zimbabwe has fallen on lean times.

The Black Caps may be touring there but their presence is merely a minor distraction for the hundreds of thousands suffering not only from drought, but widespread, critical shortages of food and fuel - and the effects of the Mugabe Government's slum demolition programme.

In Africa, aid workers say, it is easy to find places that are worse off. The difference here is that while those countries improve, Zimbabwe is sinking fast. The failing infrastructure and its once strong economy was long the envy of neighbouring nations. Now it is heading towards destruction.

The petrol shortage means long queues of driverless cars parked at service stations. A sign in front of one says: "No fuels. Plenty oils."

Sugar is just one of the staple commodities which is rationed. Flour is running out, as is anything dairy. There is little coal for the electricity generating plants, and power is off for long periods with no warning.

Notices are posted each day in newspapers, listing properties that are to be seized by the Government for redistribution.

It is the same programme that saw thousands of whites driven from the country, and dozens killed.

Inflation has rocketed, meaning the few people with jobs are finding their salaries outmatched by the cost of living. It is expected to reach 1000 per cent by the end of the year.

The harshest recent assault on Zimbabwe was the Government-sponsored Operation Murambatsvina, translated as "Operation Clean Up" or "Operation Clear Out Trash".

It has seen bulldozers destroy entire suburbs, tearing to rubble houses of people who mainly live in areas supporting the Movement for Democratic Change; the main opposition party.

More than 700,000 have been left homeless, most with nowhere to go.

The Government claimed the move was a strong action against building code violations - others say it was Mugabe's method of removing his opposition.

In each of the demolished areas, there is graffiti supporting the Movement for Democratic Change. The party's voters have gone, cleared from their homes.

Reporting Zimbabwe's troubles is difficult in that it places at risk those who speak, as well as those who report. "I haven't been to jail," said one Zimbabwean man whose house was bulldozed a month ago.

He shares this because speaking to me, and speaking of his troubles, could earn him prison.

Others say; "I have been to jail", and their desire for anonymity is governed by a fear of returning.

It is hard to judge whose fear is greater - those who know what waits, or those who don't.

"Get the truth out," one white former farmer urged, also insisting his name not be used.

"People must be told."

THE MORNING of the first test dawned blue and hot, as has every day since the rainy season failed to emerge last year.

It is so dry that in places the earth seems to have given up. It has cracked in areas, and there is thick dust everywhere. Even at the beginning of spring, few plants have not wilted.

For Zimbabwe's poor, facing all other deliberate catastrophes, it means difficulty growing and harvesting their most basic food, maize.

At some stage, during the calls for the cricket tour to be banned, it was suggested the sport would be a welcome lift for the Zimbabwe people.

So I take a guest I'll call Vincent to the cricket, a man from the south of town who had his home bulldozed. The contrast between the desolate bush on the town's outskirts, and this lush ground, astound my guest, who can't believe there is so much water to spare.

Vincent's home was destroyed completely in Operation Clean Up. His wife was so hungry she had sought work as a prostitute, and his two children had been taken to the country where his parents could care for them while he searched for work. He has had little luck in this country with 80 per cent unemployment, yet each night needs 75,000 Zimbabwe dollars (NZ\$6.05) for a rented room and food, to avoid sleeping in the cold.

We sat and watched the cricket from the dawn of the game to the day's end, and he was baffled. Most people in Zimbabwe have no idea of how the game is played, he tells me.

Vincent's neighbours, whose homes were also destroyed, watch football when they watch sport. He has seen cricket on television, but only in passing. Judging by clothes and conversation, those around us are mainly the "rich".

One Zimbabwean supporter - designer sunglasses and expensive watch - says many of the 1000 supporters here are sent in by bus on Government contract, to give the appearance of an enthusiastic crowd. He points out a cluster wearing national colours, parading around, blowing on trumpets and singing. The game goes on, and Vincent sits and applauds dutifully, out of courtesy cheering on New Zealand. His applause is cued by my clapping, as he has little idea of what's happening.

"What has happened?" he asks, when a Zimbabwean bowler appeals for LBW. How do you explain that to someone who has never watched a game of cricket?

Three fighter planes pass over the ground, which neighbours Mugabe's presidential palace, followed by two more as the morning goes on. Outside on the streets, there are soldiers armed with AK-47 rifles, with bayonets fixed. Locals warn not to be on Chancellor Ave, which runs between Mugabe's home and the cricket, after dark. Cars are banned and pedestrians have been shot and killed by trigger-happy, nervous guards.

On day two, a white Zimbabwean settles down for the match as his team's opening batsmen take the field. "It must be hard for these guys, hey, waking up every morning and thinking 'we are going to lose today'," he says.

Today is Heroes Day, celebrating hard-won independence 25 years before. It's an important anniversary for Zimbabwe, but despite the public holiday there are no more than 500 people here for the game.

The group of "supporters for hire" has shrunk, as has the level of transport used to get them in.

Last year's argument over race-based selection for the team has not eased, with the inclusion of white players in this team.

Black supporters, sitting at the Keg & Maiden pub that opens on to the pitch, talk about how they should not be

allowed, especially as they are bowled one after another.

A black supporter says: "Most teams, you know, only the next player to bat puts pads on. With Zimbabwe, everyone puts pads on."

The presidential helicopter - flying with three other helicopters - heads past the ground for the national stadium, where Defence Day is being celebrated. "We call it

Gooks and Spooks, this weekend," says a white woman.

The derogatory "Gooks" is for Heroes Day, describing the "terrorists" who won independence, while "Spooks" is for the military.

Zimbabwe is all out for 59, and is put in to bat again after lunch. It does little better in the afternoon. The team has been destroyed, and the Government propaganda machine reports the next morning: "The worst cricket team ever."

HARARE IS now "clean", as Mugabe intended. It happened in the most despicable way, with police forcing people from their homes as the bulldozers rolled in. Operation Murambatsvina has been nicknamed Operation Tsunami, and the name is just in its effect, although fails to carry the menace deserving a deliberate act rather than a force of nature.

In the suburb of Mbare, south of the city centre, the destruction begins. It's as simple as turning a corner, from intact buildings to ruins.

Mbare was a bustling hive of activity, known for its vendors and street stalls selling goods from across Zimbabwe. It was a cultural draw for tourists, wanting to see the "real Africa" without leaving the city. Now it is nothing but ruins of houses, street on street.

It was dense living, before the bulldozers came, with homes built tight against each other. Now they have been smeared into nothing.

Inside the wreckage there are signs of the contents which the occupants were barred from taking. Anything with value has been scavenged already.

One man, who lived here, says he ran from work when word filtered out. He arrived to find a cordon of armed police, and had to stand and watch as his television and furniture were picked up and hurled in front of the bulldozers.

The whole crowd stood by and watched, because any alternative was too dangerous.

Vincent offers to show me his home, or what is left of it, and navigates us south of the city to Chitungwiza, a suburb 10km away.

It was once described as middle-class, and here, free of the press of the city, the magnitude of the destruction becomes clearer. On the road south, huge tracts of land have been cleared of structures.

If this was a tsunami, there are a few who have stayed, trying to rebuild a life among the ruins. There is the occasional tarpaulin tent, or sheet of fibrolite, tacked against the few walls still standing.

There are few compared to the many who once lived here.

"They have gone to the bush. Many will die. You cannot eat leaves," Vincent says.

There's another queue at the local petrol station, as there is at all petrol stations. This queue, being out of town, has been here longer than most. Dust is caked thick on the cars which stretch down the road, around a corner and out of sight.

"Here's is my house," says Vincent, turning off the road.

In contrast to Mbare's homogenous destruction, the houses here were spaced far enough apart that the bulldozers destroyed and pushed each home into its own pile.

The only remnants of this small estate are the parking bays, built at the entrance. The concrete borders of the bays are only a third of a metre high - perhaps too small to attract the interest of the bulldozers.

Atop the concrete are flower beds, planted along the parking bays, showing the care taken and home-making ambition of those who once lived here.

The flowers have died, and small ferns and other plants have wilted for want of care and water.

"This was my home," says Vincent. "It was pink."

He points to one pile, and as he says, there is pink among the rubble, a light happy colour peeking out from the grey surrounds.

The remains look unlikely to have ever been a house, although Vincent says the one bedroom, bathroom, sitting room and kitchen was plenty for himself, wife and two kids.

The day the bulldozers came, they were foreshadowed by police, moving through the estate and ordering people out. They went, taking what they could carry, and there was nothing to come back to.

The destruction, driven by intent, has not inspired anger or hatred in Vincent. "What can I do?" he asks.

"There is nothing. Nothing."

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