ZIMBABWE: Picking up the pieces after OperationCleanup

Irin News

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BULAWAYO, 17 Aug 2005 (IRIN) - One early morning in June, Mthulisi Ndiweni, 55, suddenly found himself homeless. Government bulldozersrumbled into the squatter camp of Kilarney on the outskirts of Zimbabwe's secondcity, Bulawayo, and tore it down.

Ndiweni and his family of five, along with a thousandother unemployed or low-income earners in Kilarney, had become local victims of the government's much-criticised Operation Murambatsvina (Drive out Trash) - anationwide programme ostensibly aimed at urban renewal, which left more than 700,000 people homeless and jobless.

The families in Kilarney had been unable to afford rentalsin Bulawayo, and throwing up a wooden-sided hut without planning permission oraccess to official water and electricity connections was their only option if they wanted a chance to find work.

"We were angry, but because the police officers werearmed, there was nothing we could do. We just watched the bulldozers destroyingour houses ... I remember one police officer dragging an ill man, who used tobe my neighbour, out of his hut before setting it on fire. The officers weregenerally not sympathetic to anyone," Ndiweni recalled.

After spending two weeks at the mercy of the winter chillwith a dozen other people who had also been displaced by the cleanup operation, Ndiweni relocated to a church in the city, where he was offered sanctuary by amulti-denominational coalition.

The respite didn't last: he and his family were movedagain by the police, this time to a holding camp to await relocation toNdiweni's rural home - in line with the government's insistence that all squatters should leave the urban areas.

However, like many other Zimbabweans, Ndiweni was born intown and had no recollection of any rural roots; his family, along with fourothers, was transported from the holding camp to Tshitatshawa, a rural villagein northern Zimbabwe, and dumped at a shopping centre.

"They told us to locate traditional leaders of thearea and ask for pieces of land where we could set up homesteads and live. Thepolice also threatened to kill us if we ever returned to the city," hetold IRIN.

Ndiweni said the villagers initially considered them withsuspicion and traditional leaders were reluctant to accept them, but attitudeshave changed and the new settlers are now picking up the pieces of their lives.

"The villagers thought we were thieves who wanted tosteal from their homes, but when we explained our plight they becamesympathetic and gave all of us land to build homesteads." he said.

Rural suspicions of outsiders are often fuelled by the popular beliefs that people from the cities make ends meet by brewing beer andsex work. "They set standards (social and cultural) that we have to stickto," Ndiweni noted.

Although his family is getting back on its feet, manychallenges remain. "There are no jobs here, and food is in short supply inshops - where it is available, it is very expensive and we can't affordit," he pointed out.

"At the moment we are eating food that was donated tous by church leaders who helped us while we were still in Bulawayo. Theypromised to bring some more for us, and we just hope that they do so beforethis gets finished."

Zimbabwe is facing serious food shortages due to recurringdroughts and the government's fast-track land redistribution programme, which disrupted agricultural production and slashed export earnings.

Relief agencies estimate that 4.5 people, especially thosein the rural areas, are in need of food aid, but the government is yet to make a formal appeal for humanitarian assistance from the international community.

Aided by a host of NGOs, local churches have played acentral role in donating food to victims of Operation Murambatsvina.

Pastor Albert Chatindo, spokesperson for the churches inBulawayo, told IRIN that they had tracked down more than 1,000 people dispersed nrural Matabeleland, a vast region in southwestern Zimbabwe, and were assisting them with food and other relief items.

"These people need our support now more than everbefore, and we feel it is our duty as the church to come to their rescue,"said Chatindo. "We distribute maize-meal, cooking oil, dried fish, sugarbeans and nutritional porridge for those with little children; we also distributeseeds so that when rains fall they can plant crops and be self-reliant."

However, he pointed out that many of the displaced werestill battling for acceptance by their new host communities. "[Sometimes]traditional leaders are reluctant to give some of them land to build homes and such people are being kept by well-wishers at their homes."

Thulani Ngwenya, a village head in Tshitatshawa, saidalthough villagers in his area were sympathetic to the new arrivals, he hadalso heard of some communities that were resisting their integration.

When the government embarked on the relocation exercise, it assured the displaced that they would be met by chiefs and village heads, who would provide them with land and food.

Chatindo noted that the relocated families he had met werenot getting any relief assistance from the government.

Local government minister Ignatius Chombo told IRIN thegovernment was in the process of setting up a taskforce to distribute reliefaid to displaced people.

"As far as I know, all is well out there; people weremet by chiefs, as per our order, and are being given land to settle," saidChombo. "Each family is being given a bucket of maize after a certainperiod of time and, really, I don't think it would be fair for anyone to saythese people are not being catered for by government."