

Living in fear after Harare evictions

By Justin Pearce

BBC News website, Zimbabwe

In the first of his series following an undercover trip to Zimbabwe, Justin Pearce reports that the authorities in the capital, Harare, are continuing to destroy homes and forcibly remove residents, despite an international outcry.

"We stayed outside without shelter, until we started to build shelters," his mother, Beatrice explains.

They were evicted on 28 July from the Porta Farm settlement on the edge of Harare and transported to Hopley Farm on the opposite side of the capital.

Beatrice, her husband and their three children were among the estimated 10,000 people who were dumped without food, shelter or water in Hopley Farm, which was set up in the latest phase of the government's crackdown on dwellings that the authorities say are illegal.

The government says it intends to turn Hopley Farm into a permanent settlement, and has promised basic building materials.

The dwellers were moved to Hopley Farm shortly after the visit to Harare by UN envoy Anna Tibaijuka, who issued a report sharply critical of the government's Operation Murambatsvina [Drive Out Rubbish].

The government has said that evictions have been suspended but in Harare, there are signs that the authorities have no intention of stopping, despite the international outcry.

Demolitions continue

In the Epworth suburb, black crosses painted on the walls of houses mark the houses that are still awaiting demolition.

In Harare's Jacha neighbourhood alone, aid staff say 2,000 houses have been condemned.

While the earlier demolitions were carried out with little or no prior notice, the painting of black crosses indicates that some of the houses have been given a temporary reprieve thanks to a court ruling that the demolitions did not follow the proper procedures.

"When the first demolitions were done they were challenged by some people. The law says you must give three months' notice and a reason. Now they have been given notice for 30 September," a Zimbabwean humanitarian worker told the BBC News website.

Nevertheless, demolitions continued well into the month of August, with the residents getting little or no notice.

"Houses were demolished last week. It continued after the envoy [Dr Tibaijuka] left," the aid worker added.

"All this happened the week before last," said one elderly landlady, indicating the pile of rubble in her back yard where she had previously rented rooms out to lodgers.

The demolition has robbed her of most of her monthly income.

Evicted twice

The eviction from Porta Farm has left Beatrice and her neighbours bewildered, since they had been instructed to settle there following an earlier round of evictions in the early 1990s when the government decided to clean up Harare's townships ahead of a Commonwealth conference and a visit by Queen Elizabeth II.

"They said: 'You have been building where you are not allowed', but they were the ones who took us to Porta Farm in the first place," Beatrice said.

While at Porta Farm, Beatrice had a job at a paper-making project that had been set up by foreign donors. All that came to nothing when the bulldozers moved in.

"The project, the building and our equipment were destroyed," she said. Beatrice no longer has an income, and her husband is also unemployed.

"My oldest daughter was at school, but she has been out of school since the clean-up operation started."

Aid barred

International humanitarian staff say the government barred them access to Hopley Farm for 10 days after the settlement was established.

This meant that humanitarian assistance was late in coming, a delay that proved fatal in at least one case.

"We got tanks of water from Unicef [on 12 August]," says Joan, 48.

"Previously we had been taking stagnant water from the river. Some people have been complaining of stomach problems, and there is no clinic.

"Someone died - a young woman with two children. The children are now with their grandparents, who don't have the means to look after them," Joan says.

Clean water, blankets and foodstuffs are now starting to arrive, but residents say the government is using the donor aid for its own ends.

"The government welfare department is interfering," says Miriam, 45.

"They say the food is from them but it's really from the donors."

Fear

The camp remains under constant surveillance. I was unable to gain access to the site, but interviewed residents in a safe location.

"Right now we are living in fear. We are living with guards and police in plain clothes, and all sorts of people we don't know," Joan says.

"Any vehicle from a church or non-governmental organisation is not allowed in. We can't even pray. The moment we gather together we are called by the police.

"Every time we go to get firewood we are rounded up. The place is almost a desert. We are cooking by burning maize stalks and leaves," Joan says.

"Right now they are putting fear in us," Miriam adds.

"They are beating people up at night. They are saying if you do anything mysterious we'll remove you or beat you up."

All names in this piece were changed to protect interviewees.

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