

22 July 2005

ZIMBABWE: Displaced cleared from transit centre

IRINNews

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BULAWAYO, 22 July (IRIN) - Armed soldiers and Zimbabwean police on Friday blocked the road to Hellensvale, a transit camp north of the second city, Bulawayo, as authorities ordered those displaced by the government's urban cleanup operation out of their shelters.

The roadblock, half a kilometre from the camp, prevented IRIN's correspondent from reaching Hellensvale. "I'm sorry, you cannot proceed, just return to where you come from if you don't want trouble," IRIN was told.

Behind the security detail a thick cloud of dust and smoke could be seen rising into the air while heavily laden trucks rumbled out of the camp, reportedly to offload people in their rural home areas.

The government announced on Thursday that Hellensvale and Caledonia Farm, a much larger transit centre outside the capital, Harare, would be closed down. The people made homeless by the government's widely condemned cleanup blitz would either be returned to their now demolished townships, or transported to their rural home areas.

"We don't want our people to continue living in such camps, so that is why we are closing them," Local Government and Housing Minister Ignatius Chombo told the displaced at Caledonia Farm on Thursday. "They should cease to exist, and on Saturday they should be history - all those with rural areas will be taken there."

A large number of the 4,500 displaced at Caledonia Farm had come from Hatcliffe, a settlement demolished by the police in June, even though many of the residents had held valid lease agreements.

"Those with stands and have their allocation papers in order at Hatcliffe should go back, and those with proof that they were employed. But those that have never applied for a house are going to their rural areas," Chombo affirmed.

In Bulawayo, where two major squatter camps were razed by the police, officials said none of the 750 people cleared from Hellensvale would be allowed back into the city.

Chombo told the homeless that arrangements had been made with chiefs for those relocating to the rural areas to be allocated land for resettlement, and some food would be made available upon arrival.

"Chiefs will welcome you with a bucket of maize for food, and you will be given land to farm and set up your homesteads," he announced.

The rural areas have been hard hit by yet another drought, with some 4.5 million people expected to be in need of food aid this year.

About 375,000 people were affected by the demolition programme that began by targeting informal settlements and markets in May. Thousands of children have dropped out of school and the humanitarian community has also expressed grave concern for the plight of the vulnerable - the elderly, sick, orphans and people living with HIV/AIDS.

The government said Operation Murambatsvina ('Clean Out Garbage') was "to rid the capital of illegal structures, businesses and criminal activities", which also posed a health risk. Many people affected chose to stay in their communities, some forced to sleep out in the open, rather than go to the transit centres.

A report by the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy, Anna Tibajuka, who visited Zimbabwe for two weeks, is believed to be sharply critical of the cleanup campaign.

Meanwhile, the government said its rebuilding programme, Operation Garikayi/Hlalani Kuhle ('Stay Well'), aimed at constructing houses for the urban poor affected by the demolitions, was underway.

In Bulawayo the authorities have begun clearing land and allocating some stands, although it was unclear what selection criteria were being used to clear the massive backlog on the city's waiting list for housing.

Sceptics have questioned the government's capacity to finance the US \$300 million project.

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