

Homeless in Harare

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A swarm of helmeted police, backed by paramilitaries toting AK-47s, descend on a poor urban neighborhood, demanding that residents get out of town. Families hurriedly gather their few possessions before the bulldozers demolish their homes. Many head for the countryside, although a fuel shortage makes travel difficult. Some end up sleeping on the streets or in overcrowded refugee camps, burning whatever they can to keep warm through frigid winter nights. Others huddle in churches packed with still more displaced people, all with similar stories.

This scene and hundreds like it have been playing out across Zimbabwe over the past month while outsiders pay scant attention. At least 200,000 people -- possibly as many as a million -- have been rendered homeless by President Robert Mugabe's "Operation Murambatsvina" ("drive out the rubbish"), which bears a disturbing resemblance to Pol Pot's brutal "ruralization" campaign in Cambodia three decades ago. Mr. Mugabe's long years of autocratic misrule have broken Zimbabwe's economy and produced chronic food shortages. Now he appears worried that the misery he has created could lead to an uprising. His bulldozing campaign seems intended to disperse the urban poor, who overwhelmingly favor the opposition.

Mr. Mugabe is also targeting the illegal structures of the economy's informal sector -- the black market -- by shuttering flea markets and roadside kiosks across the country. Even in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city, where vendors had permits from the city council, stalls were closed and in some cases were destroyed. Once bustling marketplaces sit empty. For many Zimbabweans, these were the only source of affordable food and clothing -- and often the only source of jobs in a country where the formal-sector unemployment rate hovers near 80 percent.

The crackdown appears to foreshadow Mr. Mugabe's next objective: to nationalize all land, annulling titles and freeing up property for use in international bartering. In return for huge swaths of farmland, as well as mining interests and Zimbabwe's unwavering support of its Taiwan policy, China has supplied fighter planes, armored personnel carriers, AK-47s and riot gear. This close alliance with China is part of Mr. Mugabe's "look east" policy, under which the country also maintains ties with Iran and North Korea. Mr. Mugabe's fellow tyrants are untroubled as Zimbabweans face starvation, malnutrition and disease.

Too many African leaders seem untroubled too. Neighboring South African President Thabo Mbeki in particular clings stubbornly to his failed "quiet diplomacy," despite the similarity between Mr. Mugabe's campaign and the routine demolition of shacks that displaced millions during South Africa's apartheid era. Mr. Mbeki leads the country with the most potential influence over Zimbabwe. If he wants the New Partnership for Africa's Development -- a program his country helped initiate -- to have any credibility, he must speak up about the dictator next door.

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