

Mugabe rebuffs UN plans for \$30 mln emergency aid

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By Evelyn Leopold

UNITED NATIONS, Aug 25 (Reuters) - President Robert Mugabe's government has refused a \$30 million U.N. emergency fund-raising drive to provide food and medicine for Zimbabweans hardest hit by his demolition campaign of urban slums, U.N. relief officials said on Thursday.

U.N. aid agencies presented documents to the government some three weeks ago that would provide assistance to more than 300,000 people, but there was no agreement, according to telephone interviews with aid officials in southern Africa, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"We are continuing to work with the government but we have not gotten their support on the document to date," said Kristen Knutson, a spokeswoman for the U.N. emergency relief coordinator, Undersecretary-General Jan Egeland.

At issue is Zimbabwe's reluctance to appear needy and be the target of a U.N. "flash appeal" of about \$30 million. The government is still smarting from a July 22 U.N. report that called Zimbabwe's bulldozing of urban slums a disastrous and unjustified venture, the aid officials in southern Africa said.

In response to the report, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan pledged urgent action to mobilize assistance for Zimbabwe, where inflation has soared and a turnaround for its depressed economy looks bleak.

"We have a duty to help those in need," Annan said. "The United Nations will urgently seek agreement with the Government of Zimbabwe to mobilize immediate humanitarian assistance on the scale that is required to avert further suffering."

On Aug 4, the United Nations announced it would launch an appeal within a week to provide shelter, food and sanitation to those most affected by the evictions.

But as the days slipped by, no appeal was launched. Egeland intends to give a news conference on Friday on Zimbabwe's humanitarian situation but not appeal for funds, Knutson said.

Some 700,000 people lost their homes or livelihoods or both and 2.4 million people were affected one way or another, said the U.N. report by Anna Kajumulo Tibajuka, executive director of the Nairobi-based U.N.-Habitat agency.

Last week, the Harare government said it had prepared a 45-page response, which accused the United Nations of exaggerating the impact of the evictions. The U.N. report failed to address "a cocktail of social, economic and security challenges that were negatively impacting on the country's economy and the populace," the official newspaper, Herald, said.

U.N. and other aid agencies are still operating on the ground in Zimbabwe. The World Food Program is reaching some 1.1 million people and plans to feed 3 million more in December.

The new "flash appeal" would have added 300,000 to 400,000 vulnerable people to the WFP roster immediately, a spokesman for the agency said.

Zimbabwe last month declared an end to the two-month demolition operation, which government officials have said was aimed at rooting out urban crime and a prelude to building better housing for poor Zimbabweans.

But on Tuesday, Harare city authorities said they would resume efforts to drive out street children and illegal vendors who had returned to the capital, raising concern the blitz could begin again.

UNICEF, the U.N. Children's Fund, reported that 250,000 children were homeless, many living in transit camps as a result of the demolitions. With relief funds scarce, the agency said in a statement that its own staff "had opted to help children out of their own pockets."