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Zimbabwe: Harare queries SACC churches' sincerity over aid

HARARE- Zimbabwean authorities last night again questioned the sincerity of South African churches and said they should comply with every requirement set by Harare if they were "genuine" they wanted to help victims of its home demolition campaign two months ago.

Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (ZIMRA) officials have barred a local partner of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) from distributing to victims of the controversial mass demolition campaign 6 000 blankets donated by the council unless import duty was first paid for the blankets.

This is despite the fact that the revenue authority normally allows donated goods into the country duty free.

Thirty-seven tonnes of food sourced by the SACC for displaced Zimbabweans is still held up in South Africa because Harare has not yet cleared the food despite the South African Department of Agriculture issuing a certificate to confirm the food was not organically produced.

The Harare administration, which like several other southern African governments does not allow genetically modified food (GMO), had initially banned the food aid saying it wanted proof it was not GMO.

Powerful State Security Minister Didymus Mutasa, who also oversees aid distribution and land reforms, said he was not aware of these specific reasons ZIMRA wanted duty paid for the SACC-donated blankets.

But he insisted: "They should satisfy all requirements set by the government if they are genuine they want to help - in any case who said those people do not have blankets, what were they using before (their homes were demolished)?"

Officials of the SACC's Zimbabwean partner, Christian Care, on Wednesday described the duty demanded by Harare for the blankets as "quite significant".

Christian Care director Reverend Forbes Matonga, who had said the organisation was tracking down senior government "people" to try and work out an agreement over the duty issue, could not be reached last night to establish progress over the matter.

The SACC angered Harare when two delegations it sent to Zimbabwe to report on the mass home demolitions harshly criticised President Robert Mugabe and his government, saying conditions in transit camps set up for the displaced were inhumane.

Zimbabwe government-run media in turn accused the SACC of having been funded by British intelligence to report negatively on the urban clean-up exercise in order to demonise Mugabe and his government.

Mugabe accuses Britain of mobilising its powerful Western allies to vilify Zimbabwe and sabotage its economy as punishment for seizing land from whites and giving it to blacks.

South African President Thabo Mbeki, a key Mugabe ally, has however backed the SACC efforts, meeting with the council twice to discuss its efforts to help at least 700 000 Zimbabweans the United Nations (UN) says were left without homes or income by the clean-up exercise.

According to the UN, another 2.4 million people were also affected by the home demolitions which the world body said were in violation of international law but which Harare said were necessary to rid cities of squalor and crime. - ZimOnline