Zimbabwe: Housing Tsunami Continues

AfricaFocus Bulletin

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Editor's Note

Despite a devastatingly critical report by UN-HABITATDirector Anna Tibaijuka, the government of Zimbabwe is continuing itsdrive to destroy "illegal" housing and shops that isestimated to have made at least 700,000 people homeless in the last two months. Zimbabweans, rejecting thegovernment's term Operation Murambatsvina ("Clean Out Garbage") compare the assault on the country'spoor to a "tsunami."

The UN report was careful not to implicate President RobertMugabe directly in responsibility for the destruction, but saidthose responsible should be held accountable. Also last week,renowned Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, speaking in South Africa,called for African leaders to end their reluctance to criticize "rogues and monsters" such as President Mugabe. "Bulldozershave been turned into an instrument of governance and it is the ordinarypeople who are suffering," he said, "it is a disgrace on the continent."

This AfricaFocus Bulletin contains a short update from the UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks, and a backgroundanalysis and critique by Zimbabwean human rights activist Mary Ndlovu,that appeared in Pambazuka News earlier this month. The webversion of this bulletin, at http://www.africafocus.org/docs05/zim0507.php)

also contains the text of the executive summary from Ms. Tibaijuka's report. The full report is available at:

http://www.un-habitat.org/documents/ZimbabweReport.pdf

For previous issues of AfricaFocus Bulletin on Zimbabwe, see

http://www.africafocus.org/country/zimbabwe.php

For a wide range of reports from Zimbabwe civil society, see

http://www.kubatana.net

Zimbabwe: Evictions Continue Despite InternationalCondemnation

UN Integrated Regional Information Networks

http://www.irinnews.org

July 25, 2005

Harare

[This report does not necessarily reflect the views of theUnited

Nations.]

Ignoring a call by the United Nations to halt evictions ofpeople living in unauthorised housing, Zimbabwean police on Fridayordered residents out of Porta Farm, one of Harare's oldest informal settlements, about 35 km west of the capital.

Since the launch of Operation Murambatsvina ('Clean OutGarbage') in mid-May, the UN estimates that 700,000 people have beenmade homeless or lost livelihoods as a result of the blitz on the informal homes and unlicensed vending of the largely urbanpoor.

A report by UN-HABITAT Executive Director Anna Tibaijukaafter a two-week fact-finding mission to Zimbabwe recommended thatthe

evictions, "carried out in an indiscriminate andunjustified manner, with indifference to human suffering", bestopped.

"The government of Zimbabwe should immediately halt anyfurther demolitions of homes and informal businesses and createconditions for sustainable relief and reconstruction for thoseaffected," read the report, presented last week to UN Secretary-General KofiAnnan.

The latest police operation at Porta Farm was the secondtime in a month they had tried to clear the 7,500 settlers from thearea. At the first attempt in June, homes and markets were demolished to force people to return to their rural areas, or to a holdingcamp at Caledonia Farm, 15 km north of Harare, but many of theresidents refused to move.

Aid workers said on Monday that the police were determined to clear the remaining people. Residents were being grouped according to place of origin in preparation for their transport out.

The evictions, part of a drive to "clean up" thecities, have been carried out despite the Porta Farm community having won ahigh court order last year allowing them to stay.

When IRIN visited the settlement on Sunday, around 70policemen were monitoring the removal of the residents, who are among the poorest and most disadvantaged in Harare.

"We have been camping here since Friday, and we willonly go when all the people have been removed. This time our bosses have instructed us not to use force on the settlers," said apolice officer - a reference to the death of 11 people when policeused

teargas in a bid to evict residents in September last year.

In one corner of the camp, reduced to rubble and heaps ofhousehold goods, five young men defiantly beat a drum and danced to an improvised song vowing not to move. Elsewhere, people were packing their belongings into trucks provided by the army and Harare municipality.

"I returned from Caledonia Farm two weeks ago becausethat place was like a prison for me and my three children," saidTabita

Mugomba, a 38-year-old widow.

When the home she had lived in for 10 years was demolishedin June, she went to Caledonia but left most of her belongings atPorta.

"Besides, I had to fend for my children, who have sincestopped going to school. Here at Porta Farm I had been surviving byselling fish to motorists," said Mugomba, holding the hand ofher thin seven-year-old boy.

Mugomba said she would try and move in with her brother andhis family in Harare's working-class suburb of Mbare but wasunsure about how well she would be received, as she had been out oftouch with him for some time.

Porta Farm dates back to 1991, when the government movedthousands of people from unauthorised settlements in Harare; becauseit was supposed to be temporary, basic amenities like water, schools and health services were never provided.

Tibaijuka's report said Operation Murambatsvina hasindirectly affected 2.4 million people, and the humanitarian consequences "are

enormous".

"It will take several years before the people and society as a whole can recover. There is an immediate need for the government of Zimbabwe to recognise the virtual state of emergency that has resulted, and to allow unhindered access by the international and humanitarian community to assist those that have been affected," the report noted.

The government has dismissed the UN's findings as biased.Local Government Minister Ignatius Chombo told IRIN that thepeople had been evicted from illegal settlements, "and I don'tthink the UN can sanction illegality".

He stressed that the government's new corrective programme,

Operation Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle ('Stay well'), would develop

housing at an estimated cost of US \$300 million. "Ourpeople are

much happier because the government is giving them land, they are
getting stands, and are getting government assistance," Chombo

insisted.

On Monday only five families out of the original 4,500people remained in Caledonia Farm after the authorities moved toclose the transit camp at the end of last week. The government saidthat those without accommodation in urban areas and who wereunemployed would be relocated to their rural homes where chiefs wereasked to give them land and farming inputs.

Critics have questioned the ability of the cash-strappedgovernment to afford the housing programme's price tag, and pointed to the immediate needs of the people - especially the young, sickand elderly - displaced by Operation Murambatsvina.

"The government is acting irrationally andhypocritically, because it is causing further suffering to the very people it saysit is providing accommodation to," said Welshman Ncube, secretary-general of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change.

Zimbabwe's Tsunami

Mary Ndlovu

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http://www.pambazuka.org/index.php?issue=214

Mary Ndlovu is a Zimbabwean human rights activist

Operation Murambatsvina - sweep out the trash - has tornthrough

Zimbabwe like a Tsunami, describes Mary Ndlovu. Hundreds of
thousands of people have been internally displaced, but thetrue
cost of the government operation on the livelihoods ofpeople is
almost impossible to predict. As the G8 meets in Scotlandand

African leaders conclude an African Union Summit in Libya,

Zimbabweans feel that the rest of Africa has turned its backon
them.

Towards the end of May a tsunami struck Harare, flattening everything in its path - informal businesses, solidly builthomes, shacks, orphanages, churches, even a mosque; it took with it people's lives, livelihoods, family life, their spirit tosurvive.

Like the Asian tsunami in December, the number of its victims and the total cost of the destruction are hard to quantify; unlike the Asian tsunami, it is man-made and continues in wave afterwave of senseless brutality, reaching every corner of this increasingly miserable country.

The government calls it Murambatsvina - sweep out the trash- or Operation Restore Order. But Zimbabweans have rejected the government's term, for they are not trash, and order has notbeen restored. Only the term "tsunami" adequatelyportrays the suddenness, the scale and the nature of the catastrophic destruction which has been visited on us - not by erraticnature, but by our own government.

Suddenly, with virtually no warning, police in centralHarare descended on informal traders, breaking and burning theirstalls, confiscating or destroying their wares, and arrestingthousands. By the following week, the attacks had spread throughout Harareand to other urban centres in the country, and the assault oninformal housing had begun. Six weeks later, the operation continues.Police of various descriptions move from township to township,ordering residents to destroy their illegal dwellings or have themsmashed. Sometimes sufficient warning has been given for people toremove their furniture and salvage some of their buildingmaterials, other times the bulldozers are hot on the heels of the police, disrupting funerals, chasing people from their cooking and theirbathing. At least six people have been killed directly by the policeactions.

Many others, especially babies, the aged and those sufferingfrom AIDS have succumbed to exposure, shock and hunger as theyhuddle through the cold nights in the rubble of their homes.

Now, in the depth of the winter season, tens of thousandsremain camped in the open, dazed and unbelieving. Others, perhapshundreds of thousands, have moved into the houses of friends orneighbours or relatives, who were already overcrowded, or sleep onverandahs. Thousands are crammed into churches where they have been offered shelter and are being fed; some have managed to sell their furniture to raise the bus fare to go to their rural homes, where they face an uncertain future with no food or housing. How do we expect them to react when our President tells UNexperts that the action is for the good of the people, and they appreciate what has been done for them? Can it ever be for someone's good to destroy their home when you have nothing to replace it with? When you tell them they are rubbish, maggots, who are not wanted? When you cause them the utmost trauma of preventing them fromfeeding their families? When you destroy the huts of orphans andsmash the centres that were caring for them; when you bulldoze aclinic that was providing anti-retrovirals to AIDS patients and tellthem to go

Surely a government which turns so viciously on its ownpeople must be acting in response to a serious threat to its power, anarmed rebellion or organised sabotage at least. No. Not at all. That has not happened and government has not mentioned it. Thegovernment

to rural areas where there are no medicines.

says it is seeking to reduce crime and restore order to thecities of Zimbabwe. There has been too much illegal activity andthis must be stopped; informal trading venues and illegal dwellingswere havens for criminals, foreign exchange dealers, fraudsters; purveyors of stolen property, making once beautiful citiesfilthy and unsafe. This is a clean-up operation which will catchthe criminals, drive the forex back into the banks, and blackmarket goods into legitimate channels.

It is unspeakably depressing to watch government and partyleaders trying to defend the indefensible. Raze whole suburbs tocatch a few criminals? Deprive people of earning a living to stopthieves? How many more thieves will be created? With a nationalhousing backlog of two million units, bulldoze more than 80,000? Where is the once very professional police force whose trainingteaches them how to identify and apprehend criminals? Where are the health officials who enforce hygiene standards and the townplanners who design orderly housing developments? Why the sudden need to restore beauty to the cities?

Of course it is true that the cities of Zimbabwe havedeteriorated during the past ten years. Visitors from other parts of Africa once gawked at Harare, wondering how such a beautiful, orderly municipality could really be African. It was well-planned, most people were in employment, there was little sign of the shanty towns and street traders common in other Africanmetropolises.

But things have changed, for several reasons. First is the

deterioration in standards of government, especially thegrowth of corruption, which sees by-laws flagrantly ignored for theprice of a small bribe, and awarding of contracts to croniesincapable of delivering the services. Second was the effect of theeconomic decline resulting from the Economic Structural AdjustmentProgramme (ESAP), introduced in the early 1990's. Many urban workerslost their jobs, and government encouraged them to turn to theinformal sector to create their own incomes, in manufacturing, services and retail trading; councils which resisted were ordered bycentral government to relax by-laws to accommodate them. Third wasthe effect of the farm invasions of 2000 and thereafter. On theone hand these produced a flood of displaced farm workers, manyof whom crowded into the slums of Harare, and on the other it openedformer farmland to be allocated without any planning to loyal supporters of ZANU PF for informal settlement. Fourthly, when theopposition MDC won control of most urban councils between 2000 and 2002, government deliberately undermined their operations, using its powers under the Urban Councils Act to prevent rateincreases in line with hyperinflation. Borrowing powers to develophousing and upgrade crumbling infrastructure, especially in water andsewage reticulation, were systematically denied. The decline of Zimbabwe's cities is in large part, therefore, the direct result of government's economic and political mismanagement. Then suddenly, without consultation, public deliberation, oreven the simplest level of information, government declareditself

obsessed with illegality, and determined to eliminate it from Zimbabwe. This seemed strange in view of the fact that it is the government that has been content to ignore legality wheneverit threatened to restrict its own operations, flouting courtorders in regard to holding of elections, seizures of land, release of detainees from prison, and prosecution of known criminals. But Zimbabweans have come to know that government uses the lawwhen it finds it convenient and abuses it to pursue its political goals. In this case, the line between legality and illegality hasbecome blurred. Many of the informal traders had licences issued bythe local authorities, but many did not. Many of those who didbroke the law in other ways, by receiving stolen goods or dealing in foreign currency or black market goods, but most did not. The settlements around Harare which have now been destroyed hadthe blessing of the highest government authorities, who hadallocated stands, arranged in some cases for financing, and publicly encouraged the recipients to build homes. Does this makethem legal if the necessary planning laws have been ignored? The peopleare now being punished for taking government instructions aslegality. The cry by government that traders and home-owners were illegalis thus partly correct, and partly not. However, the methodsused in carrying out their operation of destruction are clearly notlegal. The actions of the police have all been taken without dueprocess, and violate statute law, our constitution, and internationallaw. The Urban Councils Act specifies that an illegal structurecan only

be destroyed when notice of 28 days has been given to theowner and occupier and opportunity has been given for a courtapplication; no one was given such notice. The common law does not permitthe deprivation of property in the possession of anyone withoutlegal sanction; those who had their buildings and their tradinggoods destroyed or seized had their property illegally despoiled. The constitution guarantees the right to be protected from arbitrary deprivation of property, and from cruel, inhuman anddegrading treatment. Surely destroying one's home and leaving them inthe open is cruel and degrading by anyone's estimate. The United Nations Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rightsprovides that everyone has the right to shelter, while the AfricanCharter on Human and Peoples Rights has been interpreted, in a casebrought against Nigeria, to mean that a government may not evict anyone from his home without providing alternative accommodation. How can our government claim that it is restoring legality, when allthe means it is using are quite clearly infringements of the lawat every level?

The effects and costs of the operation are certainly toohuge to measure. Six weeks since its beginning, the tsunamicontinues to destroy people's lives. The original estimates of 200,000 to 250,000 persons displaced have by now doubled. The 300,000school children displaced from schools was given by the Ministry of Education for Harare only, after only two weeks ofdemolitions. In Mutare, Bulawayo, Victoria Falls, Beitbridge, Harare itself, and

many other towns and cities, countless thousands more havesince been affected. A million traders and their families losingtheir livelihoods will have an immeasurable effect. Of course manywill begin again because they simply have to feed their families,legal or not legal. But in total, how much business is being lostfor every sector of the economy? And how many of these were sending money and food home to the rural areas. We simply can'tknow. Perhaps falling back in horror at what they have done in thepast weeks, the government has suddenly announced a programme of reconstruction. Thousands of stands will be serviced andhouses built over the next three years. Although only four houseshave been built in a week, 9,000 are to be ready in two months. This raises more questions than it answers: where will the moneycome from in a cash-strapped economy? Who will pay for thehouses? And most important of all - if government can mobilise the moneyto build houses, why didn't they do it before smashing down theones that already existed? The cost of re-housing Indonesian communities affected by the natural tsunami last December is estimated t \$US5 billion for 500,000 still homeless. We have at least that number of homeless people now. Where in our wildest dreams do weimagine we will get funding to rebuild what we have ourselvesdestroyed? Our economy was already in a state of complete collapse - whatsome have referred to as meltdown. Rebuilding on this scale ispure delusion.

But as government's efforts at damage control pick up pace, more

themes have emerged. Applicants for new trading licences and allocation of stands will be "vetted" - a termthat has not been defined. It is only assumed that they will be checked forcriminal records (few will be found) and asked to produce ZANU PFmembership cards. Already we are told that the stands at WhitecliffFarm are being reserved for civil servants - police, army and CIOprimarily; they are certainly not the people who were displaced. Women arrested for protesting were finger-printed and told theywould never get vending licenses again. "Presumptivetaxes" will be levied on informal traders, who will pay income tax on "presumed income". While party lackeys wheel and deal and surviveon kick-backs and bribes, the struggling poor will provide forthe instruments of their own oppression.

Perhaps more sinister, all these processes of "reconstruction" have been removed from the local authorities who legally have responsibility for them. Licences have always been issued bythe councils, not by the police. Housing stands have been allocated by the council housing departments. Now we have unknownauthorities responsible for allocating these resources. We have new "task forces" controlled by the army assigned to supervise the reconstruction. Clearly, there is an all-out attempt tousurp the designated powers of elected councils completely and emasculate any democratic participation of the people. We are truly heading for a military state, where central government takes everything, leaving no democratic space for anyone else. We are even to have chiefs for

cities, since they will better implement governmentpolicies!

Government is no longer by elected officials, answerable to the people. It is by appointees of those clinging to power by the barrel of the gun.

As we struggle to give a rational explanation for theseseemingly deranged acts of destruction several points emerge clearly:

- 1. This is very obviously a pre-emptive assault on urban populations, the stronghold of the opposition, and the potential source of any meaningful threat to ZANU PF's power; its mainaim seems to be to forcibly relocate poor people to rural areasby making it impossible for them to live in towns;
- 2. It is not only an attack on towns, but on informalactivities in rural areas as well wood carvers and sculptors, golddiggers, even fishermen; nor is it an attack only on oppositionsupporters, as many of ZANU PF's members have also been affected;
- 3. It seeks to impose government and ZANU PF control onsections of the economy where their grip has slipped in recent years -in the control of foreign exchange rates, the collection of taxesand the determination of who benefits from resource allocation. Assuch it is a desperate attempt to ensure that the little wealth that remains is channelled through the hands of government, to bespent as they see fit;
- 4. It is not going to improve the national economy in factit will cripple it further, and it will have horrendousconsequences on the lives of millions of Zimbabweans, reducing hundredsof

thousands more to penury;

- 5. It has been undertaken in a typically ZANU PF way -suddenly, violently, illegally and recklessly, without regard to the disastrous consequences;
- 6. One more very large nail has been hammered into thecoffin of Zimbabwean democracy, which is rapidly being replaced by an illegitimate oligarchy amassing wealth for themselves whilethe people starve, and maintaining their position by militaryrule.

 And Africa turns its back. They do no want to know. Wehelped South Africans when they were fighting a force too powerful, whydo they deny us the same? We do not want to be rescued by thedeveloped world. We want to be rescued by our fellow Africans, understanding our plight and standing by the principles to which theycommitted themselves in the African Union, the Harare Declaration, numerous international human rights instruments, the SADC and NEPAD. Why do they not care? Why do our pleas fall on deaf ears?

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