

Letter From Zimbabwe

By Cathy Buckle

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Dear Family and Friends,

For the last three months almost every single report from Zimbabwe has been about the destruction of homes, stalls and informal structures in our cities and towns. At first, when we could actually see the bulldozers, the huge clouds of dust and the piles of rubble in our towns and neighbourhoods, it was all very real and terrifying. Then we saw people desperately looking for shelter, carrying their belongings and lining the roads in their hundreds trying to get transport to move the remnants of their homes out of town and away from the bulldozers. Now, two months later, there is not much left for the ordinary passer by to see on the roadsides of Marondera. There are still piles of rubble here and there but mostly there are just empty spaces in the town. It is hard to believe that just two months ago you could buy a banana or a twist of newspaper brimming with ground nuts at the street corner. You could haggle with a vendor over a huge orange mango, an avocado or a bowl of tomatoes or even buy a hand made hammock on the side of the road. You could have your shoes re-heeled, your zip fixed or your bicycle spokes tightened by skilled self employed men and women earning an honest living from the pavements and alleyways all across Marondera. Now the town is virtually deserted, the streets are quiet, you cannot even buy a banana on the roadside and everywhere, still everywhere, the four month old ZANU PF election posters cling to our lampposts: "We are proud to be Zimbabweans on our land", the banners say. "Our land is our sovereignty" the slogans shout at us as we walk past them. We walk because after seven weeks there is still no petrol or diesel, almost no buses or taxis are moving and very few ordinary vehicles are still on the roads.

And the question everyone is asking is what has happened to all those people whose homes and stalls were demolished. Where are they living now, how are they surviving, have they got enough to eat? There are more questions than answers. This week I talked with a man who lives in a rural village and I am haunted by his stories, in shock at his descriptions. He told me of people arriving from the cities but of there being no empty houses where they can live. He told me of families doubling and tripling up to try and accommodate the desperate newcomers. He told me of meagre meals being shared and then watered down and shared yet again. He described how there was no space for people's possessions and so lounge suites and wardrobes were being stored on top of roofs - exposed to the wind, the dust and the dew. There are not enough houses in the villages, the wells are already running dry, all vegetable gardening has stopped due to the shortage of water and there is no land for all these new people to scratch a living on. It was this very excuse of congested rural villages that the ZANU PF government used when they seized all the commercial farms and turned our country from a food exporter to a begging bowl. Now the rural villages are even more congested as yet more and more people arrive.

People who once fixed shoes and bicycles, wove baskets and chairs, knitted jerseys or made hammocks now they just sit in the dusty villages, homeless, unemployed, hungry and

completely at the mercy of the government systems to whom they will have to turn, for every single one of their most basic human needs. Control is complete. Until next week, with love,
cathy.

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