Mugabe denies hundreds of thousands uprooted Wed Jul 6, 2005 8;28 AM GMT

SIRTE, Libya (Reuters) -Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe denied on Tues! day that his crackdown on illegal shantytowns had made hundreds ofthousands of people homeless.

"There is no demolitioncampaign. It's a clean-up operation and that's what all countries do," he said inbrief remarks to reporters at an African Union (AU) summit in Libya.

Western countries have beenhighly critical of Zimbabwe's "Operation Restore Order" -- a six-weekpolice blitz which is estimated to have made 300,000 people homeless.

Mugabe's government says theclean-up campaign is aimed at rooting out black market trading and othercriminal activity in poor urban areas.

Asked by a journalist aboutreports that "hundreds of thousands" of people had been made homeless by thecampaign, he replied: "Where are they? We don't know about those. It's just nonsense".

European Commission PresidentJose Manuel Barroso has said Africa must stand with the rest of the world incondemning the crackdown but Zimbabwe has not been on the agenda of thehalf-yearly gathering of leaders of t! he 53-member AU.

AU officials last week rejected calls from non-governmental organisations to intervene in Zimbabwe, saying the crackdown was an internal affair.

British Prime Minister TonyBlair has called for the United Nations Security Council to debate the housingcrackdown and what it says are wider human rights abuses after the head of the U.N. housing agency reports back from a visit to Zimbabwe.

Anna Tibaijuka, the specialrepresentative of U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, arrived in Harare on Sunday toassess the situation.

South African President ThaboMbeki told reporters he had met Annan on the sidelines of the AU summit andagreed that they await Tibaijuka's report before deciding on a course of action.

He said he expected the subjectof Zimbabwe to crop up at a meeting of African leaders and the Group of Eightindustrialised countries in Scotland this week.

"I would imagine that theywould like to raise the situation in Zimbabwe, particularly in relation toOperation Restore Order," Mbeki said.

"We are all awaiting thereport from the chief of UN-Habitat who is currently in Zimbabwe making an assessment. We'll await that report, which we will discuss with the Secretary General tosee what to do next."

Mbeki said Zimbabwe oppositionleader Morgan Tsvangirai had also raised the subject during a meeting inPretoria last week. Tsvangirai, of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), hadbeen concerned about the humanitarian problems caused by the operation.

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