

Zim army opposed house demolitions

Mail and Guardian

08 July 2005

Godwin Gandu

Harare 08 July 2005 07:14 - President Robert Mugabe ignored warnings from senior security officials that his government had "got it all wrong" in executing the controversial Operation Murambatsvina.

The Mail & Guardian has learnt that the state security organ-- the Joint Operations Command, consisting of the army, airforce, police and intelligence -- had told Mugabe three weeks ago during a weekly briefing that the Local Government Minister, Ignatius Chombo, had overstepped by "demolishing people's houses rendering them homeless". Mugabe was reminded that the operation was only supposed to target informal traders in the cities, but the President had felt "there was no going back now".

Sources in Zanu-PF told the M&G that Mugabe came under fire at the Politburo meeting two weeks ago for not discussing the operation with the party's supreme organ or the cabinet before it was implemented. "The whole process was bungled from the start. Mugabe is putting on a brave face but he is getting it from all factions in the party," the source explained. "There was a strong feeling that haphazard decisions were now being arbitrarily taken without proper coordination and consultation."

The fallout has already resulted in the resignation of central committee member and MP Pearson Mbalekwa. Retribution for his action was swift. On Thursday morning Mbalekwa himself fell victim to the government's evictionsquad. "Today they have come and taken all the equipment at my farm. They want to repossess it under the pretext that it is underutilised. Right now they are loading equipment into government trucks. My farm is being laid bare. This is all political. They are attacking my source of livelihood," he told the M&G.

He claimed that the demolitions saga has divided Zanu-PF and that senior members are likely to quit the party. "A lot of people in the party are fed up, that I know. But they can't come out in the open out of fear. They know who is behind all this in Zanu-PF but you will never get to know who initiated it and why because they are all condemning it now."

"There was no consultation in the party. It seems someone was annoyed by the outcome of the elections in urban areas and is now making all Zimbabweans suffer."

UN site inspections

This week intelligence agents were dispatched to Bulawayo and Gweru ahead of United Nations special envoy Anna Tibaijuka's scheduled inspection of sites and communities affected by the evictions.

Tibaijuka was shocked to hear that people were destroying their own homes and that the demolitions were continuing despite government undertakings that the campaign had been halted.

"Why did you destroy your own house," Tibaijuka asked an elderly woman in Luveve township in Bulawayo. "We were going to pay huge fines and were afraid of the police. If we don't destroy our homes there is a huge fine," she replied.

"I am very sorry for coming at night but I bring you greetings from UN secretary general Kofi Annan," Tibaijuka said.

An altercation ensued between the UN envoy, who has been in the country for two weeks to assess the impact of the displacements, and three Cabinet ministers — Informal sector minister Sithembiso Nyoni, Home Affairs minister Kembo Mohadi and resident minister for Bulawayo Cain Mathema.

"I was brought up in a rural home, then went to live in the cities, I don't think it's appropriate to send people there [rural areas] because they will always come back. Rural repatriation does not work. People are here [urban areas] because that's where they earn their livelihood. Urbanisation is a good thing.

"Gweru was very cold and I can't imagine people living in the open. We are here to minimise that suffering," Tibaijuka exclaimed.

Her comments drew a sharp reaction from Nyoni: "It takes political will to take such action. It takes such a bold decision to galvanise the whole nation into doing this. If we hurt anyone, we are sorry. Zimbabweans are not cleaning the cities of the poor, but we are cleaning the poverty, turning around the economy."

Tibaijuka retorted: "In discouraging evictions of such a nature we are not encouraging lawlessness."

Then Mohadi had his dig admonishing the UN envoy not to "worry about the methodology. There are many ways of going to Johannesburg. You can walk, fly or drive by road but the objective is the same. We are not criminalising poverty. We are not repatriating people to rural areas so that they become poorer. Many of the people that were living in the slums had decent houses, but were renting them out in order to live in squatter camps."

Mathema also weighed in: "Slums are a characteristic of Africa. Those who colonised Africa started poverty."

Tibaijuka was visibly irritated by the ministers' reticence. After learning that plans were underway to make 313 stands available to accommodate a thousand people in Bulawayo, she asked: "So what happens to the rest who can't get stands?"

Mathema responded: "Some will have to go back to their rural homes. We are busy vetting them. We have even discovered some are of foreign origin, they come from Malawi, Zambia and so on."

Tibaijuka replied: "We are all part of SADC (Southern African Development Community)."

Mathema's comeback: "They will have to sort out their papers."

Ministers barred from council

The three ministers were barred from attending a meeting with the opposition mayor Japhet Ndabeni Ncube and his council where the envoy was told: "We woke overnight to realise that vendors, who were operating legally, had been chased and thrown out of the city without the knowledge of the city fathers.

Now we are caught in an unenviable position of having to raise billions of dollars that were never budgeted for to finance the reconstruction."

Tibaijuka is expected to leave Zimbabwe within a week and submit her findings to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

President Thabo Mbeki told journalists that he met Annan on the sidelines of the African Union summit in Libya and that they had agreed to await the report before deciding on a course of action.

Available online at: <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/VBOL-6E4ERG?OpenDocument>. Last viewed: July 8, 2005