

Zimbabwe Arrests Street Vendors

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JOHANNESBURG, Oct. 7 - Against a backdrop of mounting economic collapse, the police in [Zimbabwe](#) say they have arrested nearly 15,000 street merchants since late September in a reprise of a campaign in May that cleared destitute squatters and vendors from urban areas.

The United Nations estimates that at least 700,000 Zimbabweans were routed from their homes and driven into rural areas during the last campaign, dubbed "Operation Drive Out Trash." The new campaign, "Operation No Sneak Return," is aimed at vendors who, stripped of any way to earn a living, have tried to return to the cities to resume business.

Because the government effectively bars foreign journalists from working in Zimbabwe, it is difficult to ascertain details of what is occurring. But telephone interviews and reports in the nation's press indicate that this week, riot-equipped police officers swept through some of the poorest areas, mostly informal settlements outside major cities, and seized goods being sold by vendors.

In a number of cases the vendors chose to fight the police - a measure, some experts say, of the rising desperation among ordinary Zimbabweans who are increasingly unable to buy essentials for their families.

Basic foods have been in short supply for years, and gasoline has been all but unavailable for months. Newspapers this week reported that there was a mosquito infestation in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city, because the city government had no gasoline to dispatch trucks to spray breeding areas.

The International Monetary Fund forecast this week that Zimbabwe's economy would shrink by 7 percent this year and that inflation, now officially pegged at 265 percent a year, would exceed 400 percent by December. Some experts consider those figures conservative.

Perhaps most ominously, shortages of seed and fertilizer are threatening to devastate next year's harvest.

Officials told the pro-government newspaper The Daily Mirror that the sweep of vendors, which has resulted in 14,706 arrests, was a routine operation that had met no more than ordinary resistance.

But telephone interviews with some Zimbabweans suggest that resistance was more widespread. Joseph Rose, 40, lives in Tafara, an impoverished settlement of about 100,000 on the eastern outskirts of the capital, Harare. Paramilitary forces demolished countless homes there in May and June, and Mr. Rose said the police were now rousting people from shopping centers and even from homes where they had been quietly selling goods to passers-by.

"On Tuesday there came some police constabularies," he said. "They came to arrest people, and I understand they were beaten up by the vendors at the Kamunhu shopping center. There were three police beaten up, three of them."

The police later returned in force and arrested three men suspected of having taken part in the beatings, he said. His report could not be independently verified.

But The Daily Mirror and other news sources in Zimbabwe have reported that there have been running battles between the police and some vendors in Harare's destitute suburbs and that crowds of people have besieged some markets where scarce commodities like sugar were rumored to be available.

Those accounts tend to bolster the suspicions of some analysts that Zimbabweans may be running short of patience - and their government cracking down on dissent - after years of privation and growing shortages. The Daily Herald, considered the government's most reliable media ally, reported this week that the campaign in May to send the urban poor into rural areas had been ordered by President Robert G. Mugabe to head off any peasant-led revolt like those that toppled governments in [Ukraine](#) and [Kyrgyzstan](#) earlier this year.

Mr. Mugabe's government has steadfastly argued that its campaign was a civic beautification drive, intended to eliminate unsightly shacks and stalls from the landscape.

But critics say the crackdown on vendors is a measure of economic desperation, an attempt to assert state control over the underground economy, which operates free of taxes and free of currency exchange rates, set by the government, which have little grounding in reality.

And by any measure, it is apparent that the country's already parlous economic situation has turned for the worse in recent months.

Recent news reports have indicated that the government is paring down the 40,000-soldier army because it is no longer able to feed the troops, and that some soldiers have protested the absence of any raise in salary since January despite a steep decline in the value of the Zimbabwean dollar. The South African newspaper Business Day quoted anonymous Zimbabwean officials as saying that some soldiers could be court-martialed for their role in the protests.

John Robertson, an economist and onetime official of Zimbabwe's reserve bank who is harshly critical of the government's economic policies, said in a telephone interview on Friday that a shortage of foreign currency had all but dried up the supply of seed, fertilizer and other basic commodities needed to begin planting for the crops that are supposed to be harvested next May and June.

"Even before the rains have come, we have a crop failure," he said. "It's done a great deal to demoralize people, and made them realize that the next year's foreign currency earnings are going to be used to buy foreign maize."

The government says the latest roundup of street vendors is aimed at alleviating the economic crisis. It accuses the street merchants of encouraging runaway inflation by selling goods at black-market rates.

Many of the goods that were confiscated - particularly staples like corn meal, cooking oil, sugar, rice and soap - are all but unavailable in Zimbabwe's stores, in part because merchants cannot obtain the foreign currency needed to buy the products from foreign-based wholesalers.

Zimbabwe suffers a dearth of foreign currency because its shrunken economy produces little that can be sold profitably abroad.

Mr. Robertson said a headlong decline in the Zimbabwean currency's value was driven in part by the government, which soaked up most of the nation's foreign exchange last month to make a payment to the International Monetary Fund on a long overdue billion-dollar debt.

Manufacturers and merchants who needed foreign currency to buy ingredients and other supplies outside the country were forced into a bidding war for the few American dollars that the government had not seized, he said.