

## **Evicted Urban Poor Held in Camps**

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With their homes and livelihoods destroyed, the future looks bleak for the victims of the government's mass demolition project.

Twelve-year-old Russel Magodo waits in a queue for the single pit latrine shared by 100,000 people at New Caledonia, a temporary camp about 30 kilometres from the Zimbabwean capital Harare.

The temperature is dipping towards zero in southern Africa's short but sharp winter, and it is drizzling with rain. Russel has ended up in this camp because like everyone else here, the Magodo family have seen their home demolished on the orders of Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe.

Mugabe turned on the poorest of the poor in late May, bulldozing, sledgehammering and burning their homes on the margins of Zimbabwe's cities and towns before forcibly removing them to so-called "transit camps" in the countryside. These sites dot the entire country and, in another time and place, might have been described as concentration camps.

A Zimbabwean reporter for IWPR evaded armed police guards to enter New Caledonia, established on a confiscated and now unproductive commercial farm, and spoke first to Russel Magodo as he stood patiently in the 40-metre toilet queue.

Increasingly, the refugees do not bother to wait, relieving themselves in the surrounding bush and adding to the already imminent health hazards. There is no clean water at New Caledonia. For washing and drinking, the new residents have to make do with a small stream that runs past the camp.

Russel Magodo and his three sisters are among 300,000 children who humanitarian organisations estimate have been forced out of school as a result of Mugabe's blitzkrieg on their homes in Operation Murambatsvina - "Drive Out the Rubbish" in the Shona language.

The Magodos and hundreds of others watched government bulldozers wreck their homes and trading stalls in Harare's working class suburb of Hatcliff, before they were herded on to government trucks and taken to New Caledonia, where they live under 24-hour police surveillance.

Russel's father, 39-year-old Tonderai Magodo, is in tears as he describes how police and officials ordered the destruction of his house. He had used the proceeds of a retrenchment package from a once-permanent job to build the home.

The houses destroyed by Mugabe's soldiers and police are described as shacks. But "shack" is sometimes too grand a term to describe the corrugated iron, plastic, asbestos and cardboard shelters that house the majority of Africans south of the equator, covering entire landscapes.

Enter a shack and it is like walking through the looking glass. Interiors are immaculate, the dirt floors covered with lino, kitchens lined with units and gas-fired stoves, beds in the back rooms, the walls papered and lined with posters of football stars and religious icons. All of it - everything the owners possess from a lifetime of struggle - kept spotlessly clean by "mamas" who often spend their days working as domestic staff for better-off black and white people.

"It was a nightmare," said Tonderai, putting the final touches to a primitive wood and plastic shelter for his young family at New Caledonia. "They demolished the house and they loaded us on to the trucks and took us here. There is no water, no school."

The future looks bleak for Tonderai. The small food stall he ran was demolished at the same time as his house, which had brick and concrete foundations and five rooms. Police stole his entire stock, including precious cooking oil and sugar supplies.

"We are not allowed to do any business here and soon we will run out of food," he said. "The nearest school is six miles away and there is no clinic or medical service."

All the time, fresh arrivals are being dumped at New Caledonia and other camps after their homes have been wrecked. Women are giving birth on sheets of cardboard without medical attention.

Another New Caledonia arrival, 67-year-old Never Panganga, is diabetic but can no longer attend hospital for regular check-ups, and his medicine will soon run out. "I can't walk seven miles [to the nearest hospital], I'm too old," he said. "Besides I have been too busy building the shack and trying to get food."

Pangana survives on a pension which, because of Zimbabwe's rampant inflation, allows him to buy only one loaf of bread, a small sack of ground maize and a bottle of cooking oil each month.

He compares his present situation with the days when the white government of Rhodesia established camps called "keeps" to stop people from supporting liberation fighters. "I lived in the keeps during [Prime Minister Ian] Smith's time. To me, it is the same life that we are living here, if not worse," he said.

Like other people evicted from their homes, Pangana cannot understand the logic behind Operation Drive Out the Rubbish, nor does he know how or when it will end.

Most analysts believe Mugabe is punishing urban dwellers for having supported the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC, in the parliamentary election in March. By driving them into rural areas he can both punish and control them.

There is no living for them in the countryside. Following Mugabe's destruction of Zimbabwe's mainly white-run commercial farming system, rural people are jobless and entirely dependent on food handouts, controlled through a system of chiefs and village headmen in government pay.

The situation of the people of New Caledonia is hopeless. The MDC for which they voted is nowhere to be seen, and Mugabe has banned humanitarian organisations from distributing food, clothing and medicines in the camps.

A group of Zimbabwean Catholic, Anglican and Evangelical church leaders has condemned the clearances as "dehumanising" for the whole nation. In a joint statement, the churchmen said, "A manmade humanitarian crisis has been created. People urgently need shelter, food, clothing, medicines and transport. Physically, these people suffer greatly. Deep within, a psychological scar has been created. Their essential nature as spiritual beings has been grossly denied and their humanity reduced to the rubble that surrounds them."

An aid worker based in Harare, whose organisation has been denied access to New Caledonia, said, "I have

been on many missions before, but this is the first time I have seen a government doing this to its own people. Our major worry is the small children and the sick. It's horrifying."

Absolom Chidzitsi is the pseudonym of an IWPR contributor in Zimbabwe.

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