

Fears NGO Crackdown May Threaten Millions

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United Nations officials warn ban on NGOs tantamount to human rights abuse.
Jason Mthombeni's 77-year-old mother has been hungry for years - now she is likely to starve.

She is one of the millions of Zimbabweans who will suffer as a result of President Robert Mugabe's ban on the activities of aid agencies in the country - imposed after he accused them of supporting the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC.

"You should come and see her some time. I have never seen such cruelty. She always talks about being hungry, but I cannot do much with the kind of money I make," said Mthombeni of the woman he calls "Usalukazi", which means old woman in the local Sindebele language.

Zimbabwe's public service minister Nicholas Goche ordered all NGOs to suspend their field operations on June 5, accusing them of violating certain conditions, yet giving no further explanation.

The directive has been slammed by human rights groups, who say that humanitarian aid for the most poor and vulnerable in society will now be severely restricted.

The relief provided by such groups had been keeping many Zimbabweans alive, since the government's so-called land reform policies of eight years ago left the former breadbasket of Africa a non-productive wreck.

A crackdown on aid agencies first began after Mugabe's popularity began to dwindle as a result of the skewed economic policies which pushed the country into recession.

In the volatile area of Matabeleland, a province in western Zimbabwe and an opposition stronghold, all aid agencies were purged after war veterans accused them of working with the MDC to destabilise the country.

Mthombeni, who is 33, and married with two children, sells sweets in the central district of Bulawayo, the former capital of Matabeleland. He plays cat and mouse with council police and members of the national police force who accuse vendors like him of operating illegally.

He does not know whether he or any of his peers will reach their 70s in a country where, according to the World Health Organisation, WHO, life expectancy has dropped by more than half since independence.

Mthombeni's mother lives with her grandchildren in Nyamandlovu, a poor resettlement area about 60 kilometres west of Bulawayo. It is now home to hundreds of veterans of Zimbabwe's liberation war, who took over productive cattle ranches and farms from white commercial farmers during violent farm invasions in 2000. The land now lies fallow.

Mthombeni says his mother's plight highlights the acute needs of rural communities, which, for years, have relied on the aid provided by humanitarian agencies. For her and for many like her, the past weeks have been particularly difficult.

When he first came to power after Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain in 1980, Mugabe pledged to work with the many aid agencies which gravitated to Zimbabwe, anxious to assist what was then seen as Africa's most promising democracy.

The then prime minister identified NGOs as crucial partners in developing and bettering the lives of both urban and rural communities.

A Time magazine story dated September 8, 1980, entitled Mugabe Pleads for Aid, reports that he called for international assistance to help rehabilitate the country, which was suffering the ravages of years of war.

Mugabe received international praise for his impressive strides towards making food, health and education available to all. The rallying cry then was "Food for all by the year 2000, health for all by the year 2000", and much of this was to be realised through strategic partnerships the government entered into with NGOs.

But Mugabe has over the years fallen out with his development partners, often accusing them of trying to work against him. He now insists despite all evidence to the contrary that the country has sufficient resources.

Addressing the recent United Nations Food Summit in Rome, Mugabe blamed the country's food woes on a hostile bid by NGOs working with his arch-enemies, the UK and America, to effect what the Southern African strongman terms "illegal regime change".

The situation in the country continues to deteriorate, making the ban on humanitarian assistance particularly tragic.

According to projections by the UN's World Food Programme, this year has seen an increase in the number of Zimbabweans who will need food assistance from four million to at least half the population, currently estimated at more than 12 million.

Another food security watchdog, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network, FEWS, this week added its voice to growing international concern, warning the ban on NGOs had exacerbated the food problem to conditions not seen in the country for more than a decade.

There are also fears of an upsurge in infant mortality, as many rural breastfeeding mothers have relied on NGOs for supplementary feeding after failing to secure adequate care from government health institutions.

Many NGOs are now closing shop.

"We are streamlining our staff after the call by government for us to stop working," a priest working for

the Catholic Development Commission, CADEC, told IWPR.

The faith-based NGO was involved in assisting rural communities in the two Matabeleland provinces with everything from food to sourcing antiretroviral drugs for HIV/AIDS sufferers.

“We don’t know what will become of these people,” said the priest, one of the few remaining missionaries who offered hope to starving millions across the country.

The UN Country Team in Zimbabwe warned this week that the ban on NGOs was tantamount to human rights abuse, creating life-threatening conditions for millions who are in dire need of food aid.

Before the ban, the acute food crisis had seen urban populations previously unaffected by food shortages lining up for handouts from NGOs, like World Vision and Christian Care.

“This is as bad as it gets,” a field officer with World Vision in Bulawayo told IWPR.

“We were feeding schoolchildren and grandmothers, society’s most vulnerable groups, but now we can only guess how they are supposed to survive.”

Yamikani Mwando is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe.

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