

No Refuge for Evicted People

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With nowhere else to turn, some people are making their way back to their bulldozed homes.

Some of the people evicted from their homes in Zimbabwean towns in recent weeks are trickling back to their destroyed homes, hoping to rebuild their lives and start afresh.

But many find that as soon as they start building on the site of their flattened shack, they are forced on to police trucks to be ferried out of town again.

The government's Operation Murambatsvina - Drive Out the Rubbish - was ostensible to clean up Zimbabwe's decaying towns and clear out criminals and people working illegally. But many thousands of homes have been bulldozed, with devastating social effects for some of the country's most vulnerable people.

Ten weeks after President Robert Mugabe's police began the mass destruction programme, countless numbers of poor people are struggling to pick up the pieces. Most of the displaced are living in abject conditions, surviving on charity. Their children's education has been disrupted, perhaps terminally, as there are no schools in the so-called "transit camps" to which the families have been removed.

The government said it plans a three trillion Zimbabwean dollar (940 million US dollar) rehousing programme. But that is an empty promise, as the government is close to bankrupt, and the funding does not appear in the national budget figures.

The fate of squatter camps like Porta Farm and Hatcliffe, on the outskirts of the capital Harare is demonstrative of the effects of the government campaign. The dazed residents have been creeping back furtively, only to be greeted by the rubble of what a short time ago were their houses.

Nixon Ndongwe had a house at Porta Farm for 12 years before it was knocked down. Like others who have nowhere else to go, Ndongwe, his wife Melody and their three children made their way quietly back to Porta Farm after officials suddenly announced they were closing the transit camp where the family had been dumped.

They are among perhaps 2,000 people who have returned to the homes which police first smashed and then burned when they moved in in July.

They now survive on help from well-wishers, particularly churches. "We came back from Caledonia Farm [transit camp 30 kilometres outside Harare] last week," a dejected Ndongwe told IWPR. "This is what we have been saying all along - that we just don't have anywhere to go."

Families like the Ndongwes felt they had no choice but to go back to Porta Farm after the government failed to deliver on a promise to allocate them with new land plots, but closed the transit camp anyway.

Despite the government's public claims that it has allocated people new housing plots, Ndongwe and many thousands of others have not benefited because they are unable to meet all the conditions. To apply for one of the limited places, they would need a rent card, a marriage certificate and a salary slip - none of

which people them are likely to possess.

“My life has just been destroyed because of government’s actions,” said Ndongwe. “Because of the government I lost my house. We have no food. They are telling everyone that we were given plots, but it’s not true.”

It was, ironically, President Mugabe who ordered the creation of Porta Farm back in 1991, when 30,000 people were rounded up from squatter camps scattered across Harare and housed in the new settlement so that they would be invisible from view during that year’s Commonwealth summit.

Those now returning to Porta Farm and Hatcliffe have not yet put up permanent shacks, fearing that the government will return and destroy them again. Instead, at sunset they put up makeshift shelters of corrugated iron and plastic, hoping to ward off the chilly night temperatures that dip below zero in the short but sharp southern African winter, and dismantle them before sunrise.

“We are afraid that they might come back and drive us away. We saw what they did to our homes and can’t take chances any more,” said Benedict Chiwora, whose shack at Porta Farm was destroyed in the blitz. “So we only build something for the night in case they come for us.”

Chiwora added that he had been told by Harare City Council that he would not be allocated a housing plot because he did not have a pay slip.

Last week, the police came back, and loaded the Ndongwes and others onto trucks, and dumped them on the road to the eastern border city of Mutare.

As the transit camp at Caledonia Farm, inmates were ordered onto trucks last week and driven away to unknown destinations.

Also last week, police evicted hundreds of homeless families who had been given refuge in churches in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe’s second city, where pastors and priests were providing temporary sanctuary for victims of Operation Murambatsvina.

Riot units raided the churches and loaded the dispossessed people into trucks. Police said they had instructions “from the bosses to take the victims to Tsholotsho”, referring to a rural community in an area of severe drought some 120 km northwest of Bulawayo.

The police raids have deeply angered the Churches in Bulawayo, a coalition of churches which has come together because of the demolition programme and the resulting humanitarian crisis.

“The removal of the innocent, poor, weak, voiceless and vulnerable members of society by riot police was uncalled for and unnecessary,” said the coalition in a statement. “It is inhuman, brutal and insensitive and in total disregard of human rights and dignity.”

Meanwhile police barred churches and non-government groups from entering Helensvale Farm, a transit camp 20 km from Bulawayo that is the second largest holding facility for families whose homes have been bulldozed and burned in the city.

“There have been no provisions for the people at the transit camp since we were ordered off Helensvale farm,” said the Reverend Ray Motsi, a spokesman for the church coalition. “And we do not know what the people are eating now because we did not supply them with long-term food and other provisions. The reports we got from the camp are worrying.”

Pastor Moyo, another of the church aid coordinators, said amenities at the camp were almost non-existent, and that armed police are stationed at the entrance gates to Helensvale Farm to check people entering and leaving the camp.

The government has reacted angrily to a highly critical United Nations report on Operation Murambatsvina, saying the findings are “biased, and did not take into consideration the effort of the government to provide accommodation”.

The report, order by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, said the operations had been carried out in a haphazard manner and that those responsible for the clearances should be prosecuted.

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