

20 August 2007

Zimbabwe: New evictions likely as humanitarian crisis worsens

In May 2005, the Zimbabwean government initiated an extraordinary campaign of forced evictions and demolitions resulting in the internal displacement of an estimated 570,000 people, many of whom remain in transit camps and have limited access to assistance. Operation Murambatsvina (“Restore Order”) targeted informal and legal settlements and businesses across the country, as homes were first destroyed in high-density shanty towns and subsequently in settlements on farms in peri-urban and rural areas. Since 2005, ongoing displacements have been noted by international observers, and the government’s eviction programmes have recently reportedly expanded to include students and illegal gold miners. The breakdown of the formal economy has led ever more people to search for livelihood opportunities in urban areas, causing an increased risk of new evictions.

The plight of people displaced by Operation Murambatsvina and of those displaced by continuing evictions and violent farm seizures is virtually impossible to assess, as there has been no national survey of IDPs since 2005. Circumstantial reports indicate, however, that humanitarian needs of IDPs are significant, especially in relation to access to shelter. The overall humanitarian situation is bleak; the government has declared 2007 a drought year, and the UN estimates that 4.1 million people will face serious food shortages in 2008. The HIV/AIDs prevalence rate is over 20 per cent, and in 2003 it was estimated that there were 1.3 million orphans in the country. Hyperinflation has led to falling production and 80 per cent unemployment. While land reforms have long caused large-scale displacement, Operation Murambatsvina and more recent evictions have compounded the vulnerability of the Zimbabwean population.

The operating environment for humanitarian agencies remains exceptionally difficult, both due to a lack of donor support and the continuing authoritarian rule by the government. Access to displaced populations, or “mobile and vulnerable groups” as they are often referred to in Zimbabwe, has only slightly improved for certain agencies in specific locations. While African governments and institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have slowly increased efforts to address the situation in Zimbabwe, it is clear that sustainable international humanitarian assistance will be impossible unless accompanied by a political process which addresses the broader questions of governance and democracy.

Background

Since independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has been governed by the Zimbabwe National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), led by current President Robert Mugabe. After independence, while the government provided better education and health care as well as higher wages and improved work conditions to the black majority, a number of political and economic problems were left to fester.

Most importantly, the question of land ownership was not addressed, as white ownership of the most fertile land continued post-independence as the Lancaster House Constitution effectively maintained the ownership pattern of colonial settlements. The Constitution included a willing-seller willing-buyer policy, but Zimbabweans and their government lacked the funds to purchase white-owned commercial farms, and many pledges from international donors to help the government buy commercial farms were never honoured (UN, July 2005, p.15). At the time of independence, a total of 15.5 million hectares of land remained in the hands of farmers of European descent, and only 3.5 million hectares of this land was redistributed between 1980 and 1997. In June 1998, the government set a target for Phase II of its land-reform programme to redistribute an additional five million hectares within six years. In 2000, only about three per cent of the target set in 1998 had been reached, and as pressure mounted on the government to redistribute the land, in mid-2000 it embarked on a “fast track” programme to distribute nine million hectares before 2001, by radically expanding the list of land available for compulsory acquisition from

white farmers (UNDP, January 2002, pp. 4-7).

Invasions of commercial farms by pro-Mugabe peasants also began in 2000, some of which were violent. The invasions were due in part to a failed constitutional referendum, which if successful would have empowered the government to acquire land compulsorily without compensation. ZANU-PF argued that by rejecting the proposed constitution, the commercial farmers were rejecting initiatives on land reform, thereby justifying government-led invasions (UN, July 2005, p.15; HRF, July 2007). The farm occupations were often led by groups of militant “war veterans” from the independence struggle in the 1970s. These veterans and ZANU-PF militias invaded not only farms listed for acquisition, but also several hundred non-listed farms (UNDP, January 2002, p.17; UN, July 2005, p.15; HRF, email communication, July 2007).

Displacement caused by land reform

Reports of farm workers being displaced as a result of Zimbabwe’s land reform process started to emerge during the first half of 2002, with many being brutally forced to leave farms and seek shelter in makeshift camps in the bush or in urban areas. Violence against farm owners and workers was widely documented (Amani Trust, 31 May 2002; BBC, 11 July 2002; HRW, March 2002).

Despite the official end of the fast-track land programme, white-owned farms continued to be listed for compulsory acquisition. Farm evictions continued in 2003, and in some cases farmers were

reportedly attacked by settlers or gangs (AFP, 28 August 2003). In July 2004, Refugees International reported that due to economic disruption and political harassment, 150,000 former farm workers had become internally displaced (RI, 23 July 2004). In 2004 the government reported that less than one per cent of former farm workers had been resettled as part of the fast-track land programme, with the majority migrating to urban settlements or rural communal areas (IRIN, 6 February 2004). As of mid-2007, farm seizures continue and are on occasion reported to be violent (USDoS, 6 March 2007, p. 7; ECHO, January 2007, p. 7; UN, 17 July 2007, p. 7). The UN in July 2007 considered 160,000 vulnerable households of ex-farm workers to require increased attention and focus in 2007, and warned that at least three areas, hosting over 1,500 ex-farm workers, could be cleared for residential reasons some time in July 2007 (UN, 17 July 2007, p. 7, 17). However, as there is virtually no current information on the specific needs and protection concerns of ex-farm workers, formulating an effective mitigation strategy remains a challenge (ECHO, January 2007, pp. 7-8).

Economic collapse and political crisis

The dire economic situation is contributing significantly to the growing humanitarian crisis. Unemployment is currently estimated at 80 per cent (UNOCHA, 10 July 2007, p. 46), and as businesses fail to keep up with inflation, production is falling. In May, inflation was officially estimated at 4,530 per cent (UNOCHA, 17 July 2007) – the highest in the world – and independent estimates are as high as 9,000 per cent (IHT, 9 July 2007). Con-

sidering the endemic unemployment, any inflation represents a significant threat to the majority of the population (HRF, e-mail communication, July 2007).

To address the situation, the government ordered in June 2007 that the price of basic commodities be cut by 50 per cent, and deployed the police and ZANU-PF militias to implement the order by force. “Operation Reduce Prices” resulted in its first six weeks in the arrest of almost 7,500 executives, business leaders and traders (The Guardian, 7 August 2007), and caused production of basic commodities to plummet. Consumers have turned to informal vendors to buy supplies, causing profits from informal trading to rise considerably (IRIN, 10 July 2007).

Growth of the informal sector is not new in Zimbabwe; since the 1990s a number of factors have led to the decline of the formal economy and growth in the informal sector. The factors relate to measures imposed by the post-independence Economic Structural Adjustment Period (ESAP), which led to reductions in skilled and unskilled labour, the closure of many manufacturing industries, prices increases and the deterioration of social services. The resulting decline of the formal sector had a particular impact in Zimbabwe’s towns and cities (UN, July 2005, p.16-17). It was partly in response to this growth of the informal sector within urban areas that the government launched Operation Murambatsvina and more recent eviction campaigns.

The decline of the economy and the resulting humanitarian situation have strong political foundations. The government has consistently displayed an often violent intolerance of political op-

position. Its brutal military campaign in Matabeleland in the 1980s, aimed at wiping out the Patriotic Front of Zimbabwe African Patriotic Union (PF-ZAPU), resulted in the deaths of some 20,000 people (UN, July 2005, p.15; ZHRNGOF, June 2005, p.6). Election periods also saw an increase in politically motivated violence and harassment, and the land invasions of commercial farms were to some extent orchestrated by the government in order to drive out the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) supporters based on them (HRF, June 2005, p.6). As the displaced commercial farm workers moved to towns and cities, informal urban settlements were increasingly viewed by the government as centres of political opposition (UN, July 2005, p.19).

The severe economic climate and increased population of Zimbabwe's cities has led to a drastic shortage of adequate, legal and affordable housing for low-income households in urban and peri-urban environments. Thus many urban dwellers have been forced to build makeshift shelters or sleep in other people's homes, often in extremely overcrowded areas. In addition, informal housing settlements have been created in a number of locations throughout the country, often with implicit approval from government officials. Often these informal settlements have included backyard extensions of legal dwellings, which provide affordable rental space and a source of much-needed income to the owner (HRF, June 2005, p.6; UN, July 2005, p.25). The lack of housing is acknowledged by the government, which has estimated the urban housing backlog to be one million housing units (UNOCHA, 30 November 2005, p.9).

Operation Murambatsvina

In May 2005, against this background of a severe housing shortage, a rising urban population, economic collapse and a political climate of violence and intimidation, a nationwide campaign of forcible evictions and demolitions in urban areas known as Operation Murambatsvina exacerbated the worsening humanitarian situation, with grave social and economic consequences for Zimbabwe's most vulnerable populations.

The official government translation of Operation Murambatsvina is Operation Restore Order, although in the Shona language "murambatsvina" literally means "clean out the rubbish". Six days prior to the launch of the operation, a municipal representative in Harare announced that an operation was underway to "enforce bylaws and stop illegal activity". On 25 May, a massive military-style operation began in Harare, Bulawayo, and other cities, with the near-total destruction of informal markets and housing structures alleged to be illegal. Within a week, some 20,000 vendors had reportedly been arrested, and homes bulldozed or burned to the ground, first in so-called shanty towns in high-density suburbs and subsequently in settlements on peri-urban and rural farms. The operation was carried out at more than 52 sites across Zimbabwe (UN, July 2005, p.12; HRW, December 2005, p.10).

Municipal police implemented many of these operations, and the army was also deployed to deter any resistance. The operation was characterised by violence, and owners of structures were forced on a number of occasions to assist in the demolition of their own homes. Informal

structures were not the only buildings destroyed: in Hatcliffe, a squatter camp north of Harare, the police also destroyed a Catholic centre for AIDS orphans, a mosque, a secondary school and a World Bank-funded lavatory facility. The police beat those who resisted, and one local rights organisation reported that the government publicly stated that resistance to the operation would not be tolerated (HRF, June 2005, p.8). As many were unable to return to their homes, large numbers of people camped alongside major roads, moved to transit camps or rural areas, or were forced to sleep in parks or other open spaces (HRF, June 2005, pp.8,11; UN, July 2005, p.34). During the operation six deaths were reported, including a child hit by a truck and a child and sick women hit by falling debris (UN, July 2005, p. 35, 62; AI, 30 June 2005).

Many of those either living or working in the structures that were destroyed did hold valid leases. While many displaced may have also not had valid titles, it is clear that the operation did not comply with domestic law regarding land ownership (UN, July 2005, pp. 58-59).

The government has given a number of justifications for the operation, including controlling chaotic urbanisation and its negative health consequences, preventing illegal market transactions including trading in foreign currency, and reversing environmental degradation caused by urban agricultural practices. Alternative motivations have been suggested, including that the operation served as retribution against those who had voted for the opposition during the last presidential and parliamentary elections, that it was a result of general concern over chaos and

congestion in Zimbabwe's cities, that it was related to the politics of succession to President Mugabe, or that it was designed to deter a popular uprising by forcing people back out of the cities and into rural areas (UN, July 2005, p. 20; HRF, June 2005, p.17).

Government figures released in July 2005 indicated that 92,460 housing structures had been demolished, affecting 133,534 households, and that 32,538 micro-, small, and medium-sized enterprises had also been destroyed. Using these figures, the UN estimates that approximately 570,000 people lost their homes. Adding those who lost their businesses or other forms of livelihood, the UN further estimates that 650,000 to 700,000 people were directly affected by the operation. Many Zimbabweans were also indirectly affected, by the loss of rental income or the disruption of informal income. In 2005, a fact-finding mission by the UN's Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe, Anna Kajumulo Tibaijuka, estimated that 2.4 million people, or 18 per cent of the population, were directly or indirectly affected by the operation (UN, July 2005, p.34). Since this mission, the UN has not conducted a national IDP survey or assessment; an informed response is thus impossible as the needs of Zimbabwe's IDPs are unknown, and previously documented humanitarian conditions need to be re-evaluated given the current context.

Humanitarian crisis

Zimbabwe's overall humanitarian situation is bleak, with Operation Murambatsvina and forced displacement being only one cause among many. 2007 was recently declared a "drought year" by the

government, with the situation in southern Zimbabwe described as especially acute. In one southern province, the government projects a 95 per cent crop failure (UNOCHA, March 2007, p. 1), and the UN estimates that 2.1 million people will face serious food shortages during the third quarter of 2007. This figure is expected to rise during the first months of 2008 to 4.1 million, more than a third of the population (FAO, 5 June 2007). Zimbabwe is also reeling from the HIV/AIDS epidemic, with over 20 per cent of Zimbabweans estimated to be infected with the virus. In 2003 it was estimated that there are 1.3 million orphans in the country, with roughly one million orphaned by AIDS. The cost of basic services has risen dramatically, making them unaffordable for the majority of Zimbabweans. Transport prices, due to high fuel costs, have also risen considerably, presenting extreme difficulty for people in rural areas to travel to health centres. Within rural areas, only 40 per cent of rural households have access to safe sanitary facilities (UNOCHA, March 2007, p. 1; UNOCHA, 30 November 2006, pp.5, 7). Due to the overall humanitarian situation and in particular the rising cost of living, many families have no choice but to engage in dangerous coping activities for survival, including commercial sex, crime, and illegal exchanges of assets or foreign currency (UNOCHA, 30 November 2006, 7; UNOCHA, UN, July 2005, p.39).

Access to displaced people, or “mobile and vulnerable groups” (MVPs) as they are often referred to in Zimbabwe, has reportedly improved slightly, however this improvement was only noted in a few locations by specific agencies. The issue of shelter provision has become less

politicised, which has allowed for more positive dialogue and coordination between the humanitarian community and the government (UNOCHA, 30 November 2006, p. 8; UN, 17 July 2007, p.19). However, one report noted that during 2006 the government blocked international organisations from assisting displaced farm workers (USDoS, 6 March 2007, p.7). The general political sensitivity of assisting IDPs remains, and this hinders the overall response to the needs of displaced people (ECHO, January 2007, p. 7).

Evaluating the humanitarian needs and conditions of IDPs is virtually impossible in Zimbabwe due to the lack of information and baseline data. Considering the circumstantial information that is available, however, it is likely that there are significant unmet humanitarian needs, especially in relation to shelter. While nationwide surveys have not been conducted, in July 2007 it was estimated that 10,500 households are still in need of emergency shelter (UN, 17 July 2007, p.19). Amnesty International, in a report published in 2006, notes that several thousand people remain in the open under makeshift shelters (AI, 8 September 2006, p. 3). Since late 2006, humanitarian agencies have provided 1,000 temporary and 335 permanent shelters, however gaps in provision have continued to emerge due to new evictions and improved mapping tools which have illuminated additional needs (UN, 17 July 2007, p.19).

New displacement likely

Threats and incidences of new forced displacements continue to be reported, but there is no information on the number

of people recently displaced. General reports of evictions have been noted by both the US State Department and the European Commission (USDoS, 6 March 2007, p.7; ECHO, January 2007, p.7). The UN has also reported sporadic evictions in parts of Harare, Masvingo, Bulawayo and Manicaland (UNOCHA, 30 November 2006, p. 14; UN, 17 July 2007, p.7). In late 2006, the Harare Metropolitan Governor David Karimanzira was allegedly preparing more demolitions of homes and “illegal” business structures in urban areas and rural areas where Zimbabweans make a living from informal gold mining (ICG, 5 March 2007, p.4). Evictions conducted under Operation Chikorokoza (meaning “end illegal gold mining”) has caused new displacement, sometimes of people who had already been affected by previous evictions (UN, 17 July 2007, p.16).

Many victims of Operation Murambatsvina are reported to have returned to urban areas, and as informal vendors continue to live in “unauthorised” dwellings in urban areas, it is likely that new evictions may soon take place (UN, 17 July 2007, p.7; UNOCHA, 30 November 2006, p. 14; SPT, 30 August 2006, p. 37). Displaced people have also allegedly been subjected to repeated evictions (HRW, 29 March 2007; UN, 17 July 2007, p.16).

Following protests at the University of Zimbabwe over increased lodging fees, the government evicted an estimated 5,000 students from their dormitories. Students were given 30 minutes to vacate their rooms, and student organisations have appealed for humanitarian assistance following the evictions (VOA, 10 July 2007).

National response

During the mission of the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe in June 2005, the government launched Operation Garikai (which means “reconstruction” or “resettlement”) in an effort to address the homelessness created by Operation Murambatsvina. Over two years later, there is little evidence of improvements on the humanitarian situation as a result of Operation Garikai. An NGO Shadow Report submitted to the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) in May 2007 noted that 3,325 structures had been constructed (AI, May 2007, p.4, chapter prepared by Human Rights Watch), compared to the total of 92,460 housing structures that had been directly demolished during the operation (UN, July 2005, p.34). The construction process has also been problematic; the Government’s Portfolio Committee on Local Government notes that building has been delayed due to shortages of fuel and materials as well as a lack of funding. As a result, some of the housing units are uninhabitable (GoZ, June 2006, pp.5-6). A recent visit by a journalist to Hopley Farm, a government camp for people displaced by Murambatsvina, found that all construction activities had stopped because cement and funds for workers’ salaries had run out (IRIN, 18 July 2007). Regardless of the amount of homes built, most families affected by Operation Murambatsvina are ineligible to receive support via Operation Garikai, as recipients of assistance must prove a source of income, be on a municipal waiting list, and be able to pay rent (AI, 8 September 2006, pp.17-18; HRW, December 2005, p.19). Moreover, of the structures built, 20 per cent are reported to have been al-

located to civil servants, police and soldiers, and to people not affected by evictions (AI, May 2007 p.4, and 8 September 2006, p.13).

International response

The international response to internal displacement in Zimbabwe has generally stagnated. As previously noted, since the 2005 visit of the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe, the UN has not conducted a country-wide IDP needs assessment. The absence of reliable information poses a substantial obstacle to effective humanitarian planning. The UN's 2007 humanitarian appeal for Zimbabwe totals \$215 million, and calls for emergency assistance as well as transitional support to address the causes of vulnerability (UNOCHA, 30 November 2006). As of July 2007, 51 per cent of the overall total was funded, and the protection sector was funded at 28 per cent (UNOCHA, 10 July 2007). The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs did increase its presence in Zimbabwe, resulting in an improvement in the sharing of information among humanitarian agencies (UNOCHA, 30 March 2006, p.10).

In addition to a lack of information, there is also a lack of consensus among the international community in Zimbabwe on issues related to protection and human rights. For example, for some agencies there are no IDPs in Zimbabwe – populations who are physically displaced are referred to as “mobile and vulnerable populations” (MVPs), a more politically-neutral term for a wider group of people. Other organisations use the term IDP, revealing a lack of consistency in humanitarian approach and strategy.

Discussions on implementation of the cluster approach in Zimbabwe began in June 2007 in Harare. As part of the broader humanitarian reform process, through assigning UN agencies responsibility for certain sectors or “clusters”, the UN hopes to increase the accountability and predictability of the overall humanitarian response, especially to situations of internal displacement. In Zimbabwe, following a workshop for humanitarian agencies, it was agreed to begin implementation of the nine global clusters, and it was proposed to continue discussions on three additional clusters, including a cluster on MVPs (UN, 17 July 2007, p.11; UN, 4 June 2007).

On the political front, due to the sustained breakdown of the rule of law and continuing violations of human rights committed by the government, both the United States and the European Union have renewed sanctions against members of the Zimbabwean government (EU, 23 April 2007; US, 1 March 2007). While African regional bodies and leaders have historically remained silent on the human rights crisis in Zimbabwe, in January 2007 the AU Summit of Heads of States and Governments endorsed a decision of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR), which noted violations of human rights during the land reform programme in 2000 (HRF, 8 June 2007). In May, ACHPR held a hearing on the situation in Zimbabwe and conducted a dialogue with the government in relation to its periodic report (AU, May 2007, p.9; HRF, 2 July 2007, p.10).

At the sub-regional level, quiet diplomacy has also started to give way to a

more vocal and proactive approach. The change came after a brutal attack on civic and opposition leaders in March (IRIN, 23 March 2007). Later that month the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the regional inter-governmental body of southern African states, held an extraordinary summit in Dar-es Salaam and appointed South African President Thabo Mbeki to mediate between the government of Zimbabwe and the opposition MDC; however observers branded the summit a “non-event” due to the lack of concrete action or outcomes (IRIN, 30 March 2007). Human rights groups urged the newly-appointed mediator to prioritise human rights during the negotiations. In addition, as civil society groups have been left out of the talks, doubts remain over the capacity of the process to bring about a sustainable outcome (Africa Focus Bulletin, 1 July 2007; IRIN, 21 June 2007).

In May, a group of three human rights organisations urged that the UN Security Council refer the government to the International Criminal Court over crimes committed during Operation Murambatsvina. According to the three organisations, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, and Zimbabwe Joint Media Watch, many of the human rights violations committed by the government during the operation, including instances of forced displacement, amount to crimes against humanity (COHRE, 23 May 2007). However, on the basis of a preliminary legal opinion, the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlements Issues in Zimbabwe noted that it would be difficult to sustain that crimes against humanity were committed during Operation Murambatsvina (UN, July 2005, p.65).

The humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe requires immediate action; however it is clear that for assistance to be sustainable, it must be accompanied by a political process, one which is supported by the international community and addresses the broader questions of governance and democracy in Zimbabwe.

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC’s country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Zimbabwe. The full country profile is available online [here](#).

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Note: All documents used in this overview are directly accessible on the Zimbabwe [List of Sources](#) page of our website.

About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org

Media contact:

Jens-Hagen Eschenbächer

Head of Monitoring and Advocacy Department

Tel.: +41 (0)22 799 07 03

Email: jens.eschenbaecher@nrc.ch

IDMC

Norwegian Refugee Council

Chemin de Balexert 7-9

1219 Geneva, Switzerland

www.internal-displacement.org

Tel: +41 22 799 0700

Fax: +41 22 799 0701