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Zimbabwe: Housing policy built on foundation of failures and lies

Amnesty International today condemned the Zimbabwean government's much publicised housing programme set up ostensibly to help the victims of Operation Murambatsvina, a programme of mass forced evictions which left hundreds of thousands homeless.

Operation Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle (Better Life) was launched in June 2005, with the government claiming that it would provide better housing to those who lost homes during Operation Murambatsvina.

One year after the mass forced evictions, Amnesty International returned to Zimbabwe to investigate what, if any, action had been taken by the Zimbabwean government to restore the human rights of the hundreds of thousands of victims of Operation Murambatsvina.

The findings, contained in two reports released today, reveal that contrary to government statements almost none of the victims of Operation Murambatsvina have benefited from the rebuilding, with only some 3,325 houses constructed -- compared to the 92,460 homes destroyed during Operation Murambatsvina -- and construction has ground to a halt in many areas.

Moreover, although the government has presented Operation Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle as a programme under which houses are built by government for victims of Operation Murambatsvina, in reality many people are being allocated small bare plots of land, often without access to water and sanitation, on which they have to build their own homes with no assistance.

Satellite images of just four sites in Zimbabwe show more than 5,000 houses destroyed -- demonstrating that the government's much-publicised rebuilding programme has produced fewer houses nationwide than were destroyed in just a fraction of the country.

"Operation Garikai is a wholly inadequate response to the mass violations of 2005, and in reality has achieved very little," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Amnesty International's Africa Programme Director. "Hundreds of thousands of people evicted during Operation Murambatsvina have been left to find their own solutions to their homelessness. Very few houses have been constructed. The majority of those designated as 'built' are incomplete -- lacking doors, windows, floors and even roofs. They also do not have access to adequate water or sanitation facilities."

"Many of the few houses that have been built are not only uninhabited, but uninhabitable."

Furthermore, in most sites visited by Amnesty International researchers, houses and land plots were allocated to people who had not been forcibly evicted during Operation Murambatsvina. Researchers found that in most parts of the country, no assessment has ever been carried out to identify the victims of Operation Murambatsvina or to establish where they are now. In addition, government officials have made it clear that at least 20 percent of the housing will go to civil servants, police officers and soldiers -- rather than those whose homes were demolished in Operation Murambatsvina.

Tens of thousands of people -- mainly poor women -- lost their livelihoods as informal traders and vendors during Operation Murambatsvina, as well as their homes. Despite having destroyed their only source of income, the government expects the few victims of the mass evictions to whom houses or unserviced land plots are "available" to pay for them.

"The Zimbabwean government has attempted to cover up mass human rights violations with a public relations exercise," said Kolawole Olaniyan. "The victims of Operation Murambatsvina were amongst the poorest people in Zimbabwe. The evictions and demolition of their homes drove them into even deeper poverty -- losing what little they had, such as clothes, furniture and even food. Now the Zimbabwean government is unabashedly asking them to pay for incomplete and sub-standard structures -- or for the stands on which to build a home -- at prices that would have been well beyond their reach even before their homes and livelihoods were destroyed last year."

A widow whose rental accommodation was destroyed described to Amnesty International how she and her son now live in a bathroom in a house shared by three families. In Victoria Falls, researchers found a man living in a room intended to be a toilet; his rental cottage was destroyed last year. Several thousand people remain living in the open, under makeshift shelters.

Currently, 83 percent of the population of Zimbabwe survives on less than the UN income poverty line of US \$2 dollars a day. The unemployment rate stands at about 80 percent.

Amnesty International called for Operation Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle to be subjected to an urgent and comprehensive review to bring it in line with the Zimbabwean government's human rights obligations. It also called on the government of Zimbabwe to seek international assistance to address the immediate housing and humanitarian needs of its population if it cannot do so itself.

"Operation Garikai/Hlalani Kuhle is a total failure as a remedy," said Kolawole Olaniyan. "Moreover, in its execution it has resulted not in remedies but in further violations of human rights."

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