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Nigeria: Two years after Njemanze community was demolished – Nigerians need a housing policy that respects human rights

On 28 August 2009 up to 17,000 people were forcibly evicted from their homes in the Njemanze waterfront, when the Nigerian authorities demolished the community as part of the state authorities' urban renewal programme for the city of Port Harcourt.

Two years later, Amnesty International, Nigerian NGOs and Port Harcourt waterfront communities are urging the Federal government to outlaw forced evictions to ensure the experience of Njemanze community is not repeated. The organizations are also calling on the Minister of Lands, Housing and Urban Development, Ms Amal Pepple to publicly commit to ensuring that Nigeria's Housing Policy protects people's right to adequate housing.

The demolition of Njemanze is an example of how the authorities failed to provide safeguards against forced evictions. People living in the Njemanze waterfront were given only a week's notice and there was no genuine consultation with residents to identify alternatives to the eviction. People were not provided with legal remedies and very few provided with compensation or alternative housing. Thousands of people, including children, women, and the elderly were left homeless and vulnerable to other human rights violations.

Today, two years after they lost their homes, the eviction continues to affect people's lives as many of the settlement's residents are still struggling. Some remain homeless, like young boys from Njemanze who now live under a flyover. Others have found a place to live in a neighbouring waterfront, but are struggling to earn a living after losing the livelihoods they depended on in Njemanze. As a result many parents can no longer afford to pay for their children to go to school.

Njemanze was just one of more than 40 waterfront settlements in Port Harcourt, which make up some of the city's most densely populated areas. If the Rivers State authorities continue with the planned demolitions of all remaining waterfront settlements without first implementing adequate human rights safeguards, more than 200,000 people will be at risk of losing their homes and livelihoods.

Forced evictions are a serious human rights problem in Nigeria and the government must address this. Since 2000, more than 2 million people have been forcibly evicted from their homes in different parts of the country. Hundreds of thousands more continue to be at risk. Such evictions generally target marginalized people and slum dwellers, many of whom have lived for years without access to clean water, sanitation, adequate health care or education.

Forced evictions, far from solving the problem of slums, will push Nigeria further away from achieving its UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) targets, by driving people further into poverty and into more insecure and overcrowded housing.

Housing is a human right. However, almost two-thirds of Nigeria's urban dwellers, that is one in three of all Nigerians, live in inadequate housing, mostly in slums.

A federal housing policy and urban renewal process which protects and fulfils people's right to adequate housing and ending forced evictions, would represent a significant step in the realisation of human rights for all Nigerians. This will support Nigeria's commitment to the MDGs, specifically to reduce the number of people living in slums by 2020 (Goal No. 7, Target 11).

Signed

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