

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 44/003/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 006
24 January 2006

Embargo Date: 24 January 2006 00:01 GMT

Nigeria: Forced evictions in Lagos make thousands homeless

Hundreds of Nigerians are still sleeping out in the open nearly nine months after bulldozers and armed police arrived in the Makoko community of Lagos, demolishing homes, churches, a mosque and a medical clinic. After three days of destruction, the community was obliterated, leaving about 3,000 residents -- many already destitute -- homeless.

In a report published today, Amnesty International, in collaboration with Lagos-based Social and Economic Rights Action Center (SERAC), reveals how residents were given no prior notice of the demolition of their homes and property, which took place from 27 - 29 April 2005. Many told Amnesty International representatives visiting the destroyed community that they had been beaten up by law enforcement officials as they tried to prevent the destruction of their entire belongings by government demolition forces. They said that officials set fire to the remains, to ensure that they could not be used to re-build houses.

"The events in Makoko amount to forced evictions and as such are a grave violation of the human rights of the residents of the community," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme. "Forced evictions, carried out without consultation, adequate notice, due process, legal protection, redress and appropriate relocation measures, is a grave violation of human rights."

"The Nigerian government is consistently violating its international obligation to refrain from forced evictions. It is also failing to ensure that the law is enforced against its own agents and third parties who carry out such illegal evictions."

In Lagos, land is increasingly being sought by property developers. The Makoko area is next to a large bridge, giving it easy access to one of Lagos' main transportation thoroughways.

"The poor of Lagos pay a heavy price for living on land that has increased in value: seeing their homes razed to the ground by government bulldozers," said Felix Morka, Executive Director of Social and Economic Rights Action Center, Lagos. "These evictions and destruction have got to stop."

There is only very limited access to justice for victims of forced evictions in Nigeria, as legal aid is only available for criminal matters -- and not for civil matters such as land disputes.

Forced evictions often go hand-in-hand with other violations of human rights -- particularly the use of excessive force to carry out the evictions and to restrain residents trying to protect their homes. Victims are often beaten up, arbitrarily arrested, subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, left without

access to adequate food, clean water and sanitation among other violations. Human rights defenders and journalists investigating cases of forced evictions also face harassment and in some cases are beaten up.

The main victims of excessive use of force during evictions are women, children and the elderly, as evictions normally occur during the day, when most men are away at work. Women are also exposed to violence after evictions, when men leave the area in a desperate search for alternative housing for their families. Such violence includes rape and other sexual violence, and armed robbery.

"We urge the Nigerian government to immediately stop all forced evictions and to ensure that all victims of forced evictions thus far have adequate alternative accommodation and receive effective remedy, including adequate compensation," said Kolawole Olaniyan. "We also request that the government put in place an immediate moratorium on all other evictions until an adequate human rights-based housing policy is established throughout the country."

Background

Forced evictions are not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. It is estimated that in the last five years, over 1.2 million people have been forcibly evicted from their homes in different parts of the country. Such evictions generally target marginalized people, many of whom have lived for years without access to clean water, sanitation, adequate health care or education.

Poverty is rife in Nigeria, despite it being the Africa's largest oil producer. Lagos' current population of approximately 13 million is one of the fastest growing in the world. The United Nations estimates that it will reach 24 million inhabitants by 2010 -- making it the third largest city in the world. Lagos State Government has designated 43 deprived communities in Lagos, including Makoko, as "blighted" areas.

International human rights treaties, to which Nigeria is party, prohibit forced evictions, which the UN Commission on Human Rights has recognised as a grave violation of a range of human rights, particularly the right to adequate housing.

In the case of the *Center for Economic and Social Rights and Social and Economic Rights Action Center (SERAC) v. Nigeria (155/96)*, concerning forced evictions and a range of other human rights violations in the context of oil exploration in the Niger Delta, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights ruled that the Nigerian government had violated the right to adequate housing under Articles 14, 16 and 18(1) of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. But this decision has not yet been implemented.

Public Document

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