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Zimbabwe: Satellite images provide shocking evidence of the obliteration of a community

Amnesty International today released the first-ever satellite images of the wholesale destruction of a large community in Zimbabwe -- providing the clearest possible evidence to date of the devastating impact of the Zimbabwean government's policy of house demolitions.

"These satellite images are irrefutable evidence -- if further evidence is even needed -- that the Zimbabwean government has obliterated entire communities -- completely erased them from the map, as if they never existed," said Kolawole Olaniyan, Director of Amnesty International's Africa programme.

The organization commissioned the satellite images to demonstrate the complete destruction of Porta Farm -- a large, informal settlement that was established 16 years ago and had schools, a children's centre and a mosque. The organization also released graphic video footage showing the forced evictions taking place prior to the demolitions.

"The images and footage are a graphic indictment of the Zimbabwean government's policies. They show the horrifying transition of an area from a vibrant community to rubble and shrubs -- in the space of just ten months," said Kolawole Olaniyan.

On 27 June 2005, approximately one month after the start of Operation Murambatsvina ("Restore Order"), police officers came to Porta Farm and distributed fliers telling residents to pack up their property and leave their homes. The police told the residents they would be back the following morning, giving them less than 24 hours to comply.

Early in the morning of 28 June, a convoy of vehicles and police descended on Porta Farm. The police were heavily armed.

Residents watched helplessly as bulldozers and police officers in riot gear reduced their homes to rubble. Police officers reportedly threatened the residents, saying anyone who resisted eviction would be beaten. The destruction of Porta Farm went on all day -- only ending when darkness fell. Thousands of people were forced to sleep outside in the rubble in mid-winter.

The next day, the police returned to continue with the demolitions. They also began to forcibly remove people on the back of trucks.

The Porta Farm evictions took place while the UN Special Envoy, Mrs. Anna Tibaijuka, was in Zimbabwe. On 29 June members of the Special Envoy's team visited Porta Farm and witnessed demolitions and forced removal of people in police and government trucks. The subsequent report of the UN Special Envoy describes how the team was "shocked by the brutality" of what they witnessed. Local human rights monitors reported that during the chaos several deaths occurred, including those of two children.

Background

In May 2005 the government of Zimbabwe embarked on Operation Murambatsvina (Restore Order), a programme of mass forced evictions and the demolition of homes and informal businesses. The operation, which was carried out in winter and against a backdrop of severe food shortages, targeted poor urban and peri-urban areas countrywide.

In a critical report released on 22 July 2005 the United Nations (UN) estimated that in the space of approximately six weeks some 700,000 people lost their homes, their livelihoods, or both.

The communities affected by Operation Murambatsvina were amongst the poorest and most vulnerable in Zimbabwe. In several cases, such as Porta Farm, they had been the victims of previous forced evictions carried out by the authorities. They were given almost no notice before their homes were demolished and no alternative accommodation was provided. The government stated publicly that the evictees should go back to the rural areas.

The satellite images released by Amnesty International were analysed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, with funding from the MacArthur Foundation in the US.

The satellite images and video footage will be available on <http://news.amnesty.org/pages/zwe-310506-news-eng>.

To see a copy of the report *Zimbabwe: Shattered lives - the case of Porta Farm*(AI Index: AFR 46/004/2006), please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engaf460042006>.

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