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Kenya slum fires demonstrate need to ensure housing rights

The fires that swept through the Nairobi slums of Kibera and Mathare reportedly destroying up to 700 homes, were a sharp reminder to African housing ministers meeting in the city of the need to ensure slum dwellers have access to proper services.

Kibera is one of Africa's largest informal settlements and the blaze, which started early on Friday afternoon, is understood to have destroyed at least 400 homes. It came just 13 hours after a similar fire in Mathare on Thursday night apparently claimed the lives of two children and an elderly man and destroyed some 300 homes.

The fires coincided with the African Ministerial Conference on Housing and Development (AMCHUD), which has been taking place in the Kenyan capital.

"In a matter of hours thousands of people lost their homes and possessions. They have been left with nothing and many don't know where they will sleep tonight," said Justus Nyang'aya, director of Amnesty International's Kenya office.

"As African Ministers meet in Nairobi to discuss improving access to services for all, this must serve as a stark reminder to them that they cannot continue to exclude slums from their plans and budgets."

Francis Sakwa, 26, a Mathare resident and an eyewitness to the fire told Amnesty International:

"My wife and two small children were inside our home when the fire starting spreading at midnight. Our roof was on fire – luckily we managed to get everyone out and spent the night outside.

"Everything I owned has been burnt to ashes, due to the Kenyan government's neglect. Right now we do not feel safe and will have to sleep in the tent tonight," he said.

There is a high risk of fire in Nairobi's slums and informal settlements because homes are poorly constructed and the materials used are of inferior quality. In addition, people live in overcrowded conditions; and electricity connections, where they exist, are often unsafe.

In both Kibera and Mathare, the absence of proper roads made it difficult for fire services to reach the informal settlements and lack of ready access to water contributed to fires spreading between houses and other structures extremely quickly.

Hundreds of people affected by the fire in Mathare attempted a protest march to the office of the Assistant Housing Minister, but were dispersed by police. Some participants were arrested.

"The two tragic incidents in Kibera and Mathare starkly illustrate the need for governments and local authorities in Africa to address the inadequate housing conditions in informal settlements and ensure that all persons are able to enjoy the right to live somewhere in security and dignity," said Justus Nyang'aya.

