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Zimbabwe: Newborn deaths must be investigated

The Zimbabwean government should urgently investigate the deaths of newborn babies at a settlement it created to re-house people made homeless by its mass forced eviction program five years ago, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

The report *No Chance to Live, Newborn death at Hopley Settlement* found that at least 21 newborns had died at Hopley within a five month period indicating a very high level of newborn deaths within the settlement.

“When people were settled in Hopley, the government promised them a better life but things have gone from bad to worse,” said Michelle Kagari, Amnesty International’s Deputy Africa Director.

“Many of the women we spoke to felt that their minimal access to healthcare contributed to the deaths of their babies. Others suspected that their babies died of cold because they live in plastic shacks.”

“The government must ensure these women have access to maternal and newborn healthcare in order to prevent further avoidable deaths.”

The government justified its 2005 mass evictions program, Operation Murambatsvina, by claiming that the communities evicted were living in deplorable conditions. They set up a housing scheme named Operation Garikai (Better Life) to re-settle several thousand of the victims of the eviction program promising them better access to services. Hopley – located about 10 kilometres south of Harare – was one such scheme.

“The victims of Operation Murambatsvina have been forgotten by the government and, five years after losing their homes and livelihoods, their situation continues to deteriorate,” said Michelle Kagari.

Women in Hopley told Amnesty International that they were well aware of the importance of maternal and newborn healthcare, and many had received such care during previous pregnancies before the government moved them to Hopley. All said they wanted to give birth in a hospital or with the assistance of a trained birth attendant.

Many women described how they could not afford the USD 50 required to register for antenatal care. While this cost is applied to all pregnant women in Zimbabwe, Hopley residents are particularly unable to afford the costs because many lost their livelihoods during the mass forced evictions when market places and other informal businesses were destroyed.

Expecting mothers at Hopley are also affected by the lack of transport when they go into labour. The nearest maternity clinic is in Glen Norah, some eight kilometers away.

Harare City Council only has three functioning ambulances which service a population of about two million. Many private ambulances and transport operators will not go into Hopley settlement for fear of

crime, especially at night.

On 19 February 2010, Megan (40) gave birth to twin boys prematurely at around midnight and could not get transport to the maternity clinic. The babies were delivered in her shack. Both the babies died while she was on her way to the clinic the following morning. This was her fifth pregnancy. She has four surviving children who were all born before the family was settled at Hopley by the government.

Fadzai (25) went into labour on 26 February 2010 and gave birth to a baby girl who died the same day. She thinks her baby died because she could not keep it warm.

Limited access to health services is one of the causes of the high levels of newborn deaths at Hopley,” said Michelle Kagari. “Low cost interventions and basic healthcare could save young lives as well as those of their mothers.”

It appears that the newborn deaths at Hopley have largely gone unnoticed by the authorities. A Harare City Council official told Amnesty International that the council and the government did not have demographic information of the population at Hopley, which they felt was necessary to plan health interventions.

No public official figures exist but the Zimbabwean government estimates a national average of 29 neonatal cases per 1000 live births.

“The Zimbabwean authorities have failed to monitor the health situation at Hopley. They must act immediately to combat the rate of newborn deaths revealed by Amnesty International’s investigation,” said Michelle Kagari.

Amnesty International is calling on the Zimbabwe government to urgently address the threats to the health and lives of newborn babies by immediately putting in place all necessary measures to ensure pregnant women and girls at Hopley settlement, and other Operation Garikai settlements, have access to maternal and newborn care. The government must also address as a matter of urgency the appalling living conditions which expose newborns and pregnant women and girls to risks of ill health and death.

A health surveillance system to monitor the overall health situation in Operation Garikai settlements, including Hopley is also urgently needed; with a specific focus on maternal, neonatal and infant mortality and morbidity.

Notes to Editors

- Most of the people who now live at Hopley were forcibly moved there by the government. They had been living at Porta Farm, a settlement on the outskirts of Harare. The government had moved people to Porta Farm following forced evictions from Harare precincts in preparation for the 1991 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. Porta Farm was destroyed during Operation Murambatsvina in spite of three court orders barring the government from removing the community without adequate alternative accommodation.
- This report is part of Amnesty International’s Demand Dignity campaign which aims to end the human rights violations that drive and deepen global poverty. The campaign mobilises people all over the world to demand that governments, corporations and others who have power listen to the voices of those living in poverty and recognise and protect their rights. For more information visit <http://demanddignity.amnesty.org/campaigns-en/>
- The names used in this press release are false in order to conceal the identity of the women