

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

18 March 2011
AI Index: AFR 32/002/2011

Kenyan Government Urged to Protect Slum-Dwellers after Fire

Amnesty International today urged Kenyan authorities to provide assistance and support to residents of a number of Nairobi's slums and informal settlements, whose homes were partially or fully destroyed by outbreaks of fire in recent weeks.

Around 80-90% of the housing structures in the Deep Sea informal settlement in Westlands area of Nairobi were destroyed after a fire broke out in the settlement on the afternoon of 8 March 2011. According to the Kenya Red Cross, up to 10,000 people may have been affected by the fire – a majority of them having been made homeless, and dozens were reportedly injured.

The fire spread quickly, in some cases through electricity wires connecting homes to each other. Fire engines had difficulty in reaching the area because there is only one access road, which is extremely narrow and uneven.

In recent weeks fires are also reported to have broken out in other slums and informal settlements including in Kibera, the largest slum in Nairobi.

The chances of fires in homes in Nairobi's slums and informal settlements is high because of the poor quality of construction of homes and the materials used, the overcrowded conditions, and haphazard electricity connections that can increase risk of fires. The absence of proper roads, which make it difficult for fire services to reach the informal settlements and lack of access to water also lead to fires spreading between houses and other structures extremely quickly. These latest incidents of fire starkly illustrate the need for the Kenyan government to address the inadequate housing conditions in informal settlements in Nairobi to ensure that all persons are able to enjoy the right to live somewhere in security and dignity.

Last week's fire at Deep Sea informal settlement has left most residents without shelter. More than one week later, many are still sleeping outdoors, or in other temporary makeshift structures; one woman told Amnesty International she was sleeping with a friend in a public toilet facility that survived the fire and due for inauguration at the end of March 2011. Other public sanitation facilities were destroyed by the fire.

Amnesty International calls on the Kenyan government and Nairobi's local authority to provide emergency relief, including food, water and access to medical assistance to people who have been made homeless as a result of the fire at Deep Sea and other fires in Nairobi's slums and informal settlements.

Many families living in Deep Sea lost all of their belongings in the fire, including personal documents. "Now the children have to register for the National Primary School Examinations that are ongoing, whose deadline is 31 March, but for this they need birth certificates, which along with other key documents have been burnt in the fire...." said Diana, a mother of primary-school going children.

Since the fire, Amnesty International has also received reports residents have been told by local officials of the Provincial Administration that they are not permitted to rebuild their

homes and other structures ostensibly until an unknown plan is announced by the government officials. Any attempts by the authorities to prevent people from re-building and effectively remove them from areas in which they were living without putting in place a plan to provide adequate alternative housing and other safeguards that are required under international law, would violate the prohibition against forced evictions. Amnesty International calls on the government and local authority to provide assistance to people in rebuilding their homes, to help increase fire safety and to ensure that any plans for the area are developed in consultation with communities, do not lead to forced evictions or to people being left in a situation of homelessness.

Amnesty International has also received reports from some residents that since the fire, some homes have been burnt down deliberately by unknown persons and residents are concerned that these attempts may be linked to plans to evict them from their homes. The government must also ensure credible independent investigations into all the recent fire incidents, take action on the outcomes of such investigations and provide a commitment to residents that they will be protected from forced evictions.

Background

Because of a general lack of security of tenure residents of Nairobi's slums and informal settlements live in constant fear of forced evictions. Over the years residents of Deep Sea have been victims of forced evictions by different Government authorities and private individuals and companies. In previous Amnesty International research a group of the residents expressed the view that there have been frequent fire incidents "meant to make them vacate the land on which the settlement stands". Commenting on a December 2007 fire incident at Deep Sea, one resident said that "private developers who have attempted to evict us from the land on which the settlement stands were not satisfied with previous methods so they applied a different method – fire".

The work in Kenya forms part of Amnesty International's Demand Dignity campaign, which focuses on human rights violations that drive and deepen poverty. As part of the campaign, Amnesty International is calling on all governments to end forced evictions, ensure equal access to public services, and promote the active participation of people living in informal settlements and slums in decisions and processes that impact their lives.