

Zimbabwe: Up to 20,000 at risk of forced eviction

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The Zimbabwean authorities must halt the pending evictions of up to 20,000 people from an informal settlement on the outskirts of Harare for failure to pay prohibitively high lease renewal fees charged by the authorities, Amnesty International said today.

Most of the residents of Hatcliffe Extension were allocated plots of land for new homes after they were forcibly evicted by the authorities under the country's 2005 mass forced evictions programme. Operation Murambatsvina saw around 700,000 people lose their homes and/or their livelihoods.

"Residents of Hatcliffe Extension are among the poorest and most marginalized in Zimbabwean society and many households have no means of paying the lease renewal fee, especially as a lump sum," said Michelle Kagari, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Africa.

"Instead of threatening vulnerable people with eviction, the government must provide protection from the cycle of insecurity and further violations by providing security of tenure and affordable payment plans for leases."

Hatcliffe Extension is one of a number of settlements set up under Operation Garikai - the government programme that was initiated to resettle those left homeless after Operation Murambatsvina.

In reality, only a small number were resettled. The majority were forced into overcrowded existing housing stock while others were forcibly relocated to rural areas by the government.

"Operation Garikai was wholly inadequate as a remedy for the serious violations of the right to adequate housing perpetrated under Operation Murambatsvina," said Michelle Kagari.

Five years after the mass forced evictions, residents at Operation Garikayi settlements are surviving in deplorable conditions in plastic shacks without access to basic essential services.

'Residents at Hatcliffe have been utterly let down by the government. It is therefore all the more shocking that instead of taking steps to improve their current situation, the government is threatening action that will certainly increase suffering and deprivation.'" said Michelle Kagari.

In June, the authorities posted notices at Hatcliffe Extension saying that all leaseholders should pay for the renewal of their agreements by 30 September. Failure to pay would result in residents losing their land which would then be allocated to others on the housing list. There has been no consultation with the residents on the renewal process and the fee set by the authorities.

Many of the settlement's 3,000 households have no means of meeting the fee of up to US\$140 set by the government. Operation Murambatsvina, as well as destroying

homes, also destroyed the informal employment sector, depriving thousands of reliable income. The unemployment rate in Zimbabwe stands at around 90 per cent.

Since June, the residents have made several unsuccessful attempts to engage with the relevant authorities.

The problem of excessive lease fees is not restricted to Hatcliffe Extension. Residents of other informal settlements set up under Operation Garikai are also under threat of eviction.

Earlier this month, police burnt down shacks at an informal settlement in Harare's Borrowdale suburb, making over 200 survivors of Operation Murambatsvina homeless.

"The government of Zimbabwe must review and revise Operation Garikayi, in genuine consultation with survivors, to address the housing needs of all survivors of Operation Murambatsvina," said Michelle Kagari.

Demand Dignity campaign

Through the Demand Dignity campaign, launched in May 2009, Amnesty International is calling on governments globally to take all necessary measures, including the adoption of laws and policies that comply with international human rights law, to prohibit and prevent forced evictions.

Amnesty International's Demand Dignity campaign aims to end the human rights violations that drive and deepen global poverty. The campaign will mobilise people all over the world to demand that governments, big 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/>

Source: Amnesty International