

Ghana railway dwellers under new threat of forced eviction

Thousands face forced evictions as part of plans to redevelop Ghana's railway network

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Amnesty International has urged the Ghanaian authorities to halt the eviction of thousands of people living next to railway lines in the capital, Accra amid new fears that they are facing imminent forced eviction.

Known as the Railway Dwellers, the men, women and children who live and trade in kiosks and small structures built along the railway lines face homelessness and destitution if they are forcibly evicted from their homes.

The evictions are part of nationwide plans to redevelop Ghana's railway network following the signing of a US\$6 billion contract with a Chinese company for the construction and expansion of railway infrastructure, and as part of Ghana's "Better Ghana Agenda" which aims to improve living standards for all Ghanaians.

On 21 January 2011, officials from the Accra Metropolitan Authority (AMA) and Railway Development Authority visited communities along Accra's railway lines. They took measurements of the distance between structures and the little-used railway lines and issued fresh eviction notices to those people living within 160 metres of the tracks.

The eviction notices did not tell people the date that they would be evicted. However, on 21 January, the Chief Executive of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) - the local governing body - said that all structures would be demolished in time for construction work to begin on the railways lines in February. Four days later, buildings at risk of demolition were painted with the words "Remove by January 25 2011 by AMA".

"These people have been threatened with eviction on several occasions, most recently in December 2010," said Lawrence Amesu, Director of Amnesty International Ghana. "It was hoped that the authorities had put a stop to their plans, following pressure from human rights campaigners, including Amnesty International.

"Many of the people living in these communities simply have nowhere else to go. The authorities risk making their own people homeless and destitute if they go ahead with these plans"

The authorities have failed to put in place legal protections and other safeguards - such as consultation with the affected residents - to prevent forced eviction. They have not provided any

alternative housing to residents, and have no plans to do so after the evictions. These are all requirements under international law.

"Amnesty International understands the need and desire for development in Ghana, including the redevelopment of the railway infrastructure. However, development should never come at the cost of human rights," said Lawrence Amesu.

Some residents have lived alongside the railway lines in Accra for over 17 years.

The international legal prohibition on forced eviction applies in all cases and to all people, - this includes people living in informal settlements. Even when people do not have legal tenure, government authorities may not forcibly evict people from their homes.

"The Ghanaian authorities must adopt a moratorium on all evictions until safeguards have been put in place to ensure that they are carried out in line with international human rights standards, and until there is a plan to provide adequate alternative housing to those affected," said Lawrence Amesu.