

Forced evictions are a violation of human rights

The poor must be protected in African cities, where millions are denied adequate housing and face the threat of eviction

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It is a [human rights](#) violation of such proportions that it could be easily equated to that of a humanitarian emergency. Yet, despite its impact, the denial of the right of adequate housing is rarely internationally condemned or discussed.

In big cities around the world, particularly in Africa, hundreds of thousands of people have no other choice but to live in ramshackle housing, cramped conditions or inadequate structures. In the worst cases, people have nowhere to live at all.

Slums and forced evictions are the two main culprits for these living conditions, affecting millions of the urban poor. Across Africa, shanty towns – or slums – are dotted across the outskirts of most large cities, where people have migrated from rural communities in search of work.

Living conditions in slums are far from adequate: many people frequently have no access to essential services such as sanitation, clean water and healthcare, while their children cannot access primary education. Women, men and children are regularly exposed to abuses, and the state provides little security.

As well as this, the inhabitants of such settlements live with the daily threat of being forced from their homes. These evictions often take place in the middle of the night, with police, heavy-handed security contractors and bulldozers, leaving the residents little or no time to collect their belongings.

Hundreds of thousands of residents in Port Harcourt, capital of Rivers state in [Nigeria](#), are all too familiar with this threat. Large-scale redevelopment plans have left more than 200,000 people at risk of being made homeless. Already thousands were forced from their homes to make way for an eight-screen cinema complex in August 2009.

Meanwhile in Zimbabwe, six years after Operation Murambatsvina – the [mass forced evictions programme](#) carried out in June and July 2005, in which more than 700,000 people lost their homes or their livelihoods or both – thousands of men, women and children are still living in far from adequate conditions.

Many pregnant women and young babies surviving in makeshift accommodation at Zimbabwe's Hopley settlement are at serious risk of ill-health or death, because of the dreadful living conditions. There is no maternal or newborn healthcare available in the community, putting these vulnerable groups at great danger.

In Ghana, thousands of people who live close to railway tracks in Accra are being forced to make way for the redevelopment of the railway system. Many of those facing eviction have nowhere else to go, so risk being left homeless. And as is often the case, there are no plans for resettlement or compensation for these people.

The situation is just as bleak in Kenya – home to Kibera, one of the world's largest slums. Here, Amnesty International is concerned at the high level of risk of fire to homes in these settlements. The poor quality of materials used for the homes and their poor construction, combined with overcrowded conditions and haphazard electricity connections, present a deadly risk to slum residents. In March, a fire broke out in one informal settlement, Deep Sea, leaving up to 90% of the housing structures destroyed and about 10,000 people homeless.

There is no excuse for people to live in such appalling conditions. The right to adequate housing is just as essential as the right to be free from torture, or the right of freedom of expression. Safe and adequate homes are essential to any person's wellbeing, and this is not out of the reach of any of these governments.

As representatives at the UN have been meeting to discuss issues of sustainable urban development this week, Amnesty International is calling on African governments to redouble their efforts in providing adequate housing and security for those who risk having this basic right to adequate housing denied.

Every effort has to be made to ensure people living in slum dwellings have access to water, sanitation, healthcare and education in line with international law and standards.

Forced evictions are never acceptable. Governments can no longer carry on with this practice. Instead, every effort has to be made to protect the rights of the poorest across Africa's cities, including by providing peace of mind that they can live in their homes with basic facilities and in the knowledge that they are free from the threat of being evicted from their homes at a moment's notice.

- *Kate Allen is Amnesty International's UK director*