

SOUTH AFRICA: Slumming it in Jo'burg

JOHANNESBURG, 2 June 2011 (IRIN) - Johannesburg's abandoned and neglected inner-city buildings have become slum dwellings for thousands of people, many of them jobless migrants, who endure over-crowding, poor or non-existent sanitation and limited access to running water and electricity because of a lack of affordable alternatives.

With their broken or boarded up windows, peeling paintwork and unlit doorways, many of the buildings appear uninhabited from the outside, but often house up to 1,000 people in a warren-like maze of shacks and flimsy partitions.

One such building near the city's Ellis Park Stadium provides shelter to over 400 people, most of them Zimbabwean migrants, in rooms sub-divided by cardboard or washing-lines hung with sheets. By 5pm on a recent winter afternoon, the rubbish-strewn stairwells and narrow corridors are already so dark that residents use cell phones to light their way as they manoeuvre buckets of water to their rooms from a public tap outside.

"I've been in this building for two years now because I can't get work to pay rent," said Caroline Magore, a 36-year-old resident from Zimbabwe. "Here we don't pay rent, we just stay."

A number of the residents found refuge in the building following a wave of violence directed at foreign nationals that swept South Africa in 2008, but the price of a rent-free home is one without running water, functioning toilets or electricity and in the case of this building, regular threats of eviction by the building's owner and occasional harassment by the police.

"Most of the police don't give us a problem, but one comes and asks for our IDs and passports and if we don't have them, he takes your property," said another resident.

Criminals and slum lords

City authorities have identified 1,500 slum buildings, many of which were abandoned by their owners in the 1990s during the post-Apartheid exodus of white South Africans from the inner-city and have since been taken over by criminals and slum landlords who charge tenants rent but spend little or nothing on maintaining the increasingly dilapidated buildings.

A recent city survey of 4,000 residents of slum buildings found that most were paying rent (although less than they would pay for most other types of accommodation), and that around 70 percent were foreign nationals, many of them undocumented.

The situation presents a headache for the city authorities. The inner city's director, Nkosinathi Mtetwa, noted that slum lording was a lucrative business and that tracing owners who had often left the country and trying to force them to better manage their buildings was costly and difficult. Proposals are being discussed to introduce by-laws making it illegal for an owner to abandon a building, and fining them for poorly managed buildings, but the biggest problem remains finding alternative low-cost housing for the continuous stream of migrants who arrive in Johannesburg every day.

"The starting point would be to assist them to get papers," said Mtetwa. "But the role of government shouldn't end just by giving people papers, it must go beyond that."

He added that there was a disconnect between the Department of Home Affairs, the government entity responsible for assisting migrants with documentation, and the city authorities. "If, for example, you issue 200 asylum-seeker permits, there needs to be a way to liaise with city housing departments and figure out where they're going to go... They end up being the victims of unscrupulous landlords."

Health toll

Living in slum buildings often has consequences for the residents' health, but undocumented migrants are usually reluctant to seek treatment at one of the city's public clinics. Since 2007, international medical NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has run a small clinic next to the inner-city Central

Methodist Church which provides shelter to over 1,000 homeless people, most of them recently arrived Zimbabwean migrants.

“We found that more and more people coming to the clinic weren’t coming directly from the Church,” said Gabriele Santi, coordinator of MSF’s migrant health project in Johannesburg. “We found that many were staying in slum buildings and we slowly started to enter these buildings, at first to trace patients and then to do health promotion.”

Recently MSF started visiting a number of the buildings with a mobile clinic and a team of health workers who provide basic health screening including family planning services, HIV testing, immunizations and ante-natal services. Residents with other health problems are referred to public clinics with the goal of integrating them into the public health sector and improving their health-seeking behaviour.

“These are people who might have been [in South Africa] for five years and never visited a health facility,” explained Melt Ndlovu, who is coordinating the outreach programme. “We want them to view health as a priority.”

Common complaints relating to their living conditions include skin, diarrhoeal and respiratory tract infections, including TB, as well as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and stress-related ailments.

The good, the bad and the very bad

Ndlovu said the buildings MSF visits can be divided into three broad categories - the good, the bad and the very bad. “Good buildings have water, lights and people pay rent. The only problem might be overcrowding,” he told IRIN. “In a bad building, the structure itself might be damaged; maybe inside they’ve constructed shacks and partitions and it’s run by a slum lord who collects money but doesn’t connect the electricity. In very bad buildings the main features are no water, toilets or electricity.”

The building that Samuel Mokwena moved into in 2002 shortly after arriving from Zimbabwe would have fallen into the “good” category. There were not enough toilets and taps for the 700 residents living on six floors, but at least they worked and the rent was affordable for Mokwena and his wife who are both blind and rely on begging to earn an income.

“Here I pay R670 (US\$100) a month for the room,” he told IRIN. “I need a better place, but I can’t afford another place.”

Last month Mokwena and the other residents received an eviction notice from the building’s owner who has since disconnected all but two of the taps and blocked the toilets, presumably in a bid to get them to leave. Uncollected rubbish soon began piling up in corners and the caretaker started carting away pipes for scrap. The residents, most of whom have nowhere else to go, quickly organized themselves into a committee and sought legal advice. After learning that they could not be evicted without a court order, they decided to stay put and do their best to clean and maintain the building themselves.

“Some of us have documents, some don’t have,” said Lot Ncube, another resident who has lived in the building since 2003. “Most of us aren’t working, we’re street beggars and hookers.”

Paul Verryn, bishop of the Central Methodist Church, said he frequently referred residents of slum buildings facing eviction to human rights legal firms. “I know of at least four buildings where they are busy at the moment trying to evict them,” he said. “I don’t think [eviction] is an answer to the huge problem of poverty which is part of the fabric of the inner city.”

Inner city Director Mtetwa said the city was rarely informed about evictions and only got involved when vulnerable groups such as women and children were made homeless and needed emergency shelter.

MSF has been critical of the city's lack of a coherent plan of action for tackling the problem of slum buildings, but Mtetwa said government was looking at a range of interventions including the setting up of a trust to provide for emergency accommodation and the recent creation of a migrant advisory council.

"During the course of this year there's going to be big things coming," he told IRIN. "It's going to be a long road, but it's something we have to do."

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