

Thousands left homeless after evictions in Angola

Mail & Guardian Online Aug 04 2009 09:09

Piles of smashed concrete bricks, crumpled pieces of metal, dirty foam mattresses and ripped plastic bags.

This is all that remains of what was home to 3 000 Angolan families who could do nothing but stand and watch as their properties were flattened by government bulldozers.

SOS Habitat, a non-governmental organisation, says more than 15 000 people have been made homeless in the recent forced evictions on the southern peripheries of the capital Luanda, in a string of land clearances to make way for gated condominiums and shopping centres.

"They arrived at around 3am," explained Rosa, a pregnant mother of five who has lived for three years in the area of two neighbouring informal settlements known as Baghdad and Iraq.

"First came the police, and then the machines and they just started to knock down the houses. There was no warning, we had no choice but to leave because of all the police so we just grabbed what we could and then watched as they pulled down our homes," said the 29-year-old.

Many of those affected claim they have documents signed by the municipal administrator giving them rights to the land.

But according to the provincial government of Luanda, the families were occupying the area unlawfully and therefore will not be provided with alternative accommodation.

"The people who say they have documents do not have documents. That land was being occupied illegally," said vice-governor Bento Soito.

He added that many people claiming to have lost their homes were from elsewhere in Luanda but had gone there in the past two weeks to try to claim some compensation from the government.

"It is not a new phenomenon," he said. "People have done this before."

But the people in the neighbouring Baghdad and Iraq settlements are sticking by their stories.

"For the first time, I managed to get a plot of land with paperwork. I saved up money from my job and bit by bit I have built my home all on my own. Now we are told the land has a new owner and we must leave," said Pedro Manuel (24).

"There is so much land in this country, the government does not need to take land from its own people."

The issue goes deeper than the debris left by bulldozers, warned Luiz Araujo, director of SOS Habitat, an Angolan housing NGO.

"Something must be done, not just about these people who have been left with nothing, but about this situation of forced evictions and these ongoing human rights violations," he said.

"If nothing is done, it is going to lead to a revolt and it's going to create conflict which could end up being very serious and something that no one wants because we have had enough war in this country."

An early taste of this sentiment was seen last week when around 200 of the former residents protested outside Parliament.

The demonstration was short-lived as armed police moved quickly to disperse the crowd who were chanting "give us back our homes" -- but it was a rare display of anger in a country where few dare to challenge the authorities.

Vice-governor Soito accepts the capital's housing problem is "critical", saying Luanda's overcrowding is a hangover of the civil war which only ended in 2002 and destroyed the country's infrastructure.

The 27-year conflict saw millions cram into the capital where they have remained in informal settlements with little access to power and water, many of which sit opposite luxury housing estates favoured by the Angolan elite and expatriate oil workers.

President José Eduardo dos Santos, who has been in power for 30 years, pledged last year to build one million homes by 2012 and there are ambitious plans to regenerate neighbourhoods across the capital.

Luanda governor Francisca Espirito Santo told a conference on the city last week that improving housing and living standards was a government priority to reduce poverty, and pledged a shake up of the land allocation system.

But, while the conference delegates discussed the proposals over a lavish buffet lunch, just a few kilometre away in Baghdad and Iraq, people sat among piles of rubble, wondering what would happen next. - AFP