

Zimbabwean police torch informal settlement: rights groups

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HARARE — Human rights groups on Friday accused Zimbabwean police of setting fire to an informal settlement in Harare, forcing some 250 people from their homes.

Amnesty International said police, some armed and accompanied by dogs, raided the settlement in the Gunhill suburb shortly after midnight Wednesday, giving residents 10 minutes to leave their homes before setting the squatter camp alight.

"The brutality with which this forced eviction was carried out is alarming," Michelle Kagari, Amnesty's deputy Africa director, said in a statement.

"Driving people forcefully from their homes in the middle of the night cannot be justified in any circumstance."

The group said many of the settlement's residents were victims of Operation Murambatsvina (Drive Out Filth), a 2005 eviction blitz that left 700,000 people homeless as President Robert Mugabe's government bulldozed shacks and vendor stands in what it described as an urban clean-up.

Zimbabwean Lawyers for Human Rights said police had evicted the residents without arranging other housing and compared the campaign to the mass evictions five years ago.

"The question is why would they (police) do it around 2:00 to 3:00 am? Because they have not learnt from their mistakes as they have destroyed this camp without first building alternative accommodation for those affected," spokesman Kumbirai Mafunda told AFP.

"This appears like Operation Murambatsvina Two."

Amnesty International said the residents had returned to the Gunhill area and were living there without shelter.

A police spokesman denied involvement in the eviction, saying the informal settlement was a city council issue.