

# Zimbabwe: Mugabe's "Operation Murambatsvina"

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Since May 19, the Zimbabwean government of President Robert Mugabe has been carrying out a brutal campaign of forced evictions, cynically named "Operation Murambatsvina"—which is Shona for "get rid of trash." Hundreds of thousands of families who are struggling to survive in the urban areas have been branded as criminals and driven into the countryside, where they will face the possibility of starvation and death.

Armed police have moved into shantytowns all over the country, demolishing and torching tens of thousands of dwellings and the makeshift stalls of small traders, claiming they are "unlicensed." In some areas people have been forced to destroy their own homes; in others the police have used bulldozers, sledgehammers and flamethrowers.

The evictions began in the cities such as Harare, Bulawayo and Victoria Falls, but now cities, small towns and rural areas all over the country are being targeted. The United Nations estimates that "up to 360,000 people (more than 2 percent of Zimbabwe's population) throughout the country have been evicted from their homes."

According to the *Guardian*, in just one area of Harare, known as Hatcliffe Extension, the police and army have flattened nearly 1,000 homes. A Catholic priest described scenes of devastation in the capital to the BBC: "Open areas are full of people living rough. Whole families are huddled together around a pile of possessions, surrounded by the wreckage of their homes."

People are being told, "Go back to where you came from." Some people have sold the few possessions they managed to save from the catastrophe, at a fraction of their value, to raise the cost of the bus fare back to the already famine stricken countryside.

Thousands of people are living on the streets, with no shelter from the Zimbabwe winter temperatures, which at night can fall to 0C. Young children, sick people and the elderly are suffering especially. Pregnant women and newborn babies have been turned out of their homes. Many suffering from HIV/AIDS have been forced to give up their treatment and are certain to die as a result.

One witness to the events told the BBC that he knew of four people who had died after spending two weeks sleeping in the open. According to Human Rights Watch, "Three people reportedly died during mass evictions on Porta Farm on June 29 and 30, including one child who was crushed to death by falling rubble during attempted forced removals by the police."

Associated Press has reported that police were rounding people up and "piling them into lorries" for dispersal somewhere in the

countryside. Tens of thousands of people have been forced into makeshift camps with no sanitation, creating a real danger of epidemics such as cholera. Around 1,900 families were dumped at Caledonia Farm on the outskirts of Harare. Witnesses have likened conditions there to the "detention centres of the 1970s war period."

Anyone resisting the police has been dealt with brutally. In some areas the army was called in when residents protested and tried to erect roadblocks. For several weeks the government prevented the humanitarian groups from distributing food, blankets and medicine, in an attempt to cover up the scale of the disaster that government policy had caused.

President Mugabe claims that the operation was necessary because the cities were overrun with criminals and had become "havens for illicit and criminal practices and activities which just could not be allowed to go on." On June 10 he told parliament that the government had instituted "a vigorous campaign to restore sanity and order in the urban areas."

The truth is that Zimbabwe is in the grip of a deep-going economic crisis. After independence in 1980, Mugabe worked with the international financial institutions and banks. He defended the interests of the privileged white population and allowed commercial farmers to keep their land so that they could produce the cash crops that brought in foreign exchange.

But by the 1990s the country was being hit by declining prices for tobacco and other commodities. Mugabe had to increase his borrowing to stay afloat. In return he enforced IMF structural reforms intended to reduce public spending on welfare and open up the economy to private enterprise. When these measures began to threaten his position he rejected IMF demands. As a result Zimbabwe has been cut off from all sources of international finance.

Zimbabwe's isolated economy has contracted by 30 percent in the last five years, inflation is around 130 percent and the economy is in a state of "free fall." A month ago the Zimbabwean dollar was devalued by 31 percent.

With unemployment running at over 80 percent, and no social security, millions of people have no means of support. They have been forced into the "informal" or "black" economy in order to survive. Even people with regular employment are forced to dabble in the "black economy" to make ends meet.

The situation led to a vast increase in petty trading. People used all kinds of ingenuity. Some travelled to neighbouring Botswana to

buy scarce basic necessities and sell them on the “black market.” Others set up small, unlicensed businesses or ran informal “flea markets” or “tuck shops.” All this activity led to the development of a parallel economy.

The government, which is desperately short of foreign currency, saw this as a drain on the country’s resources. Mugabe’s autarkic economic policies demand that the government has complete control of foreign currency transactions. The attack on informal settlements and traders is part of an attempt to stamp out the black market.

More than 30,000 vendors have been arrested and accused of economic sabotage. This is an attempt to lay the blame for the dire situation in country on the shoulders of the most disadvantaged sections of society.

At the same time he is carrying out a pre-emptive strike to terrorise the population and to stop the development of an opposition movement that could threaten his rule. Thousands of destitute people, who have been forced into the countryside, will find themselves under the control of the local ZANU-PF tribal leaders who have total control of the meagre food supplies.

It is important to recognise that Mugabe is not acting from a position of strength. In fact, the ruling ZANU-PF party is riddled with factionalism, over who will succeed the aging president when he steps down. Sections of the political and military elite can see that his policies are creating an explosive situation in the country.

The Western press is claiming that the purpose of the evictions is to punish the urban population for voting against ZANU-PF in the March elections and in favour of the pro-Western Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). This is clearly a factor. But evictions have also been directed against the war veterans who took part in the occupations of white owned commercial farms.

The Zimbabwean press has reported that “thousands of war veterans, who had resettled themselves at different settlements around the country, had their houses demolished by the government over the past four weeks.”

One example is White Cliff Farm, where the land is being “re-peged” and allocated to members of the army and police as part of Mugabe’s strategy to strengthen the regime’s relationship with state forces. In other cases new black farmers have arrived saying they have government permission to take over the farms.

Feelings are running very high on the issue. In a statement the Zimbabwe Liberators’ Platform said that some of the fallen heroes “must be turning in their graves when their comrades and the people they liberated are brutalised by a government borne out of the liberation struggle.”

Mugabe turned to the war veterans in the campaign against the country’s white farmers, which fund the MDC in large measure. Now the agricultural sector has collapsed as a result of the drought and the failure of the government to provide seed, equipment and training to the war veterans who were settled on the land. The war veterans have thus become an encumbrance to Mugabe.

He relies on a small clique of super-rich ZANU-PF, state and army personnel to maintain his rule. He recently appointed Joyce Mujuru Moyo, wife of retired army commander Solomon Mujur, as vice-president. According to the *Mail and Guardian*, this “sparked off an intense bout of in-fighting in ZANU-PF.”

Information minister Jonathan Moyo was sacked from the government for opposing the appointment.

A senior ZANU-PF central committee member, Pearson Mbalekwa, recently resigned from the party over the eviction campaign. *Business Day* (Johannesburg) claims that others are dissatisfied and are thinking of following suit. The paper has speculated that moves may be afoot to organise a new party made up of renegades from ZANU-PF and the MDC. If this happens Moyo may try to take the leadership.

Political pressure is being stepped up by the imperialist powers. The mass evictions have been widely condemned, by the US, Britain and other Western governments, as well as human rights groups, church leaders and many others. However, whilst speaking of the “desperate situation” in Zimbabwe and condemning “the appalling cases of human rights abuses,” the British government continued to send asylum-seekers back there. Blair refused to call off the deportations, claiming it was the only way to avoid accusations that the asylum system was “running out of control.”

In response, 37 out of a total of 99 Zimbabwe detainees in Britain went on hunger strike. The threat of deportation has now been temporarily lifted. But one of the hunger strikers had to be taken to hospital before the British government relented.

The African Union leaders have hesitated to criticise Mugabe, who still has some standing amongst the African masses who oppose the imperialist powers’ campaign of economic and political destabilisation. Instead, the AU has declared that the evictions are “a domestic matter.”

Mugabe has hopes of boosting his economy through the “Look East” policy of building closer economic links with China—which is eager to establish itself in Africa and is targeting those countries in which Western businesses are reluctant to invest.

During the first quarter of 2005, trade between the two countries amounted to US\$100 million. Tobacco and tourism made up a significant proportion of Zimbabwe’s exports to China. Imports from China were mainly rubber products, chemicals, clothing, textiles and electrical goods.

On June 30, *SouthScan* reported plans by a Chinese consortium to build a “multibillion-dollar ferrochrome smelting plant in Selous, about 80km west of Harare.” When completed it will be one of the biggest ferrochrome processors in the country.

China is also offering Mugabe its assistance in organising the suppression of political and social dissent. Chinese Deputy Minister of Justice Duan Zhengkun recently led a delegation to Zimbabwe. He announced that the two countries would sign a “Memorandum of Understanding exploring areas of cooperation in the judiciary field.” Zimbabwe Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa told journalists there would be collaboration “in staff training and the prison systems because [the Chinese] have a fairly advanced prison system, thus, we would also want to tap into that expertise and knowledge.”



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