

ZIMBABWE ALERT – Relentlessly pushing Zimbabwe’s poor towards the edge

Written by Administrator
Sunday, 23 August 2015 11:15 -

Zimbabwe is not the place for an easy life today. With the economy in tailspin, businesses closing and workers being laid off in increasing numbers, and with a quarter of the population forced to work outside the country in order to keep their families alive, it comes as no surprise to learn that the unemployment rate is a staggering 90 per cent. And if life is difficult even for the few in employment, one can but wonder how the rest manage to get by.

Imagine then the precarious life of some of those living close to the edge. Take for example a settled community of some 300 families eking out a meagre existence on a barren strip of land some 15 miles east of the city of Bulawayo. The area they inhabit is given the rather imposing name of Willsgrove Farm. Here among the thorn scrub, without significant income or resources, or indeed any of the facilities we consider essential to modern life, somehow they manage to survive – just. Mind you, even in their dire poverty they are in a better position than some because at least the houses they live in are constructed of good and strong building materials. Better by far than the flimsy structures of their near neighbours in Killarney, dwellings which the Zimbabwean security forces tore down in the infamous Operation Murambatsvina back in 2005. By contrast the dwellings on the Willsgrove Farm are well constructed and of sturdy material. The community has been settled here for many years – the headman for 27 years – and no one was intending to move.

On the afternoon of 5th August a pastor was visiting this community who are a part of his scattered flock of impoverished, marginalised people. Suddenly and without warning a contingent of the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP) arrived on the scene. They produced to the old headman a document purporting to be an eviction order served on behalf of the company claiming ownership of the land, and while still talking to him proceeded to start throwing out his belongings. Minutes later a bulldozer appeared and began systematically demolishing, first his house and then the dwellings of other recognised leaders in the community. The speed of the operation was breath-taking, as was the brutality that accompanied it. Evidently the orders under which the ZRP were operating were not only to destroy these solid dwellings but to put the building materials beyond any possibility of rescue or re-use. One old man who had used all his savings on retirement to purchase one solid roof structure saw that roof knocked down and then mangled beyond recognition.

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Nor did the destruction end with the houses. Chickens reared by residents, turkeys and domestic animals suffered a worse fate. The headman himself who owned three chicken houses containing some 2,000 poultry watched helplessly as the bulldozer flattened both the structures and the birds housed in them. The remaining live chickens found among the houses were stuffed into sacks and left to suffocate. Likewise with a number of puppies seized by the ZRP.

It was a sickening display of unbelievable cruelty. Residents stood, shocked and helpless, while the wanton violence and mayhem swept through the community – a community that until that fateful afternoon had been living at peace with itself and the world. Men, women and children wept aloud at the destruction unfolding before their unbelieving eyes.

The pastor tried to remonstrate with the ZRP but to no avail. Only later was he able to persuade them even to let him know where they had dumped the items seized in the raid – mostly in the bush and further out of town. The now homeless residents of the Willsgrove Farm estate made their way on foot to these sites as best they were able in order to protect their trashed belongings.

The following morning (6th August) the ZRP returned to Willsgrove Farm and continued the wanton destruction of homesteads. But by this time the local press had been alerted and were present to witness the mayhem. So too a human rights lawyer who by early afternoon had secured authority sufficient to stop the evictions and the violence pending a Court hearing on 2

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September. It transpires that there has been some litigation over a period concerning this site and the right of the residents to live there, though as the lawyer made plain to the ZRP even the existence of a valid eviction order, if such there was, would in no way justify such wanton brutality or the destruction of the property which was the subject of litigation. In the pastor’s words their actions were “very, very cruel”, indeed “barbaric”.

Moreover this barbaric raid upon the Willsgrove Farm community is by no means an isolated incident in Zimbabwe today. Similar raids have taken places in and around Harare and Chinoyi upon street traders and other poor and marginalised communities. A common feature throughout is the destruction of well-constructed dwellings – in several cases dwellings that were built with donor funds following the terrible bloodshed that was a feature of the elections in 2008. Within the seething political cauldron that is Zimbabwe today who, outside the inner circles of ZANU PF, can say who is responsible for initiating this destructive purge, or what their motive is? It has become the lot of ordinary Zimbabweans under this suffocating tyranny simply to suffer and to endure, without asking why.

Meanwhile for the pastor and the few courageous souls who are working with him on the ground many months of intensive work lie ahead. He has already started attending to the urgent needs of this freshly displaced and traumatised community, ferrying them to collect their few battered belongings, taking those few who have relatives able to accommodate them temporarily to those homes, and providing such food, clothing and blankets as are available. Informally an urgent appeal has gone out to local churches and a limited response is beginning to trickle in from a few individuals. Remember, these are hard times in Zimbabwe for all but the tiny number safely cocooned by political patronage. For most there is little to give away or be generous with.

Zimbabwe Victims’ Support Fund has received an appeal to help the roughly 1,000 people who

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have been rendered homeless and who are in urgent need of relief supplies, particularly food and clothing. We are sending an immediate initial sum of \$ 1,000 and hope to send more later, depending on the needs identified on the ground and the response of our supporters.

Your prayers are also requested for the victims of this latest outrage and for those bravely standing with them in their hour of desperate need. Remember Karl Barth’s words – “To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.”

17th August 2015

Editorial note: we have taken out names.