

Zimbabwean government urged to stop mass evictions

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HARARE - The European Parliament has urged the government not to evict about 20,000 illegal settlers from an informal settlement on the outskirts of Harare for failure to pay prohibitively high lease renewal fees charged by the authorities.

Most of the residents of Hatcliffe Extension were allocated plots of land for new homes after they were forcibly evicted by the authorities under the country's 2005 forced mass eviction programme known as Operation Murambatsvina.

In a resolution adopted last Thursday the European MPs called on the Harare authorities to "scrap the arbitrarily imposed lease renewal fees, which residents simply have no means of paying."

Residents of Hatcliffe Extension are among the poorest and most marginalised in Zimbabwean society and many households have no means of paying the lease renewal fee, especially as a lump sum.

Murambatsvina saw around 700,000 people lose their homes and their livelihoods after police bulldozed thousands shantytowns and backyard shacks as well as informal businesses in a campaign that President Robert Mugabe defended as necessary to clean up Zimbabwe's cities and get rid of crime.

A special United Nations envoy, Anna Tibaijuka, sent to probe the home demolitions issued a damning report saying the campaign violated the rights of poor people in breach of international law.

Tibaijuka contested Mugabe's claims that Murambatsvina was merely a slum clearing operation, saying in her report that the campaign appeared aimed at breaking and punishing political opposition support and resentment that will have resulted in a revolution over the failing economy.

Hatcliffe Extension is one of a number of settlements set up under Operation Garikai - the government programme that was initiated to resettle those left homeless after Operation Murambatsvina.

In reality, only a small number were resettled. The majority were forced into overcrowded existing housing stock while others were forcibly relocated to rural areas by the government.

The EU Parliament is the latest to call for the halt of the planned evictions after Amnesty International made several such pleas.

"Instead of threatening vulnerable people with eviction, the government must provide protection from the cycle of insecurity and further violations by providing security of tenure and affordable payment plans for leases," Amnesty's Michelle Kagari said in a recent statement.