

Apartheid style evictions in Zimbabwe

Written by Administrator

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News is breaking of the violent eviction of a whole community living close to Bulawayo. Yesterday (10 January) residents of what is known locally as the McDonald Bricks site, some 20 miles east of the city, found themselves faced with three truck loads of ZRP (Police) and a support unit which had come with orders to destroy their homes forthwith.

Approximately 1,400 families live in this community. Some of these have been living here for a lifetime, though their number has been increased in recent years by others drawn to the site, which has no water or other amenities, by the opportunity to avoid municipal charges they cannot afford. Together they comprise an impoverished community which, without any help from the State, has been forced to fend for itself under the harshest conditions. Their very survival is a mark of their resilience.

Shocked and surprised by the arrival of a large police contingent and the demand they should step aside to allow their cherished homes to be demolished, the residents responded angrily. An ugly scene was developing between, on the one hand, the police and their support unit, brandishing batons and guns, and on the other, the residents, some of whom seized spears and knobkerries to defend their property. At this point, eyewitnesses report, the Commander of the support unit addressed the people. He reminded them of what had happened in Harare following the disputed elections last year, when the army opened fire on unarmed civilians already in flight, killing six and wounding many others. He said the people should remember the army's reputation and not stand in their way.

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Bulldozers then moved in and the brutal destruction of the dwellings followed, accompanied by the wailing of distraught women. Some of the structures were flimsy but others were more substantial. Many had been constructed of quality building material, including the occasional tiled roof here and there. The demolitions proceeded relentlessly, while the residents could only stand by, scarcely believing their eyes, as they watched their only security in life being trashed.

A local pastor was one of those who witnessed the unbelievable cruelty. He has ministered to these people for over 20 years and was in shock.

Not only is this a moral outrage but the legality of it is, to say the least, questionable. The ownership of the land on which the “McDonald Bricks” community lives is disputed. An attempt a few years ago by a would-be developer to establish ownership of the freehold of the site was rejected by the Court on the evidence of a surveyor called in to interpret the only available maps. That decision was appealed to the High Court, but the matter was not then resolved. As far as the residents were concerned, pending any further application to the Courts, they were entitled to remain in occupation of their properties.

The residents were not even permitted to remove their belongings. This the police did in their own fashion, later dumping items seized from the dwellings along the Old Gwanda Road. No compensation was offered to those evicted, nor any assistance with relocation.

The distraught evictees have no reserves of food or cash for transport. A few have been offered temporary lodging by Christian friends but most are now sleeping in the open. Without shelter, food or the most basic facilities, all – and particularly little children and the frail elderly – must be considered at great risk.

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The exercise of such brute power in the name of the State against poor, defenceless citizens must surely invite comparison with some of the worst atrocities committed by the Apartheid regime against some of the long-settled communities in South Africa that were perceived to stand in the way of that regime's racist ideology.

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