

Statement on Land Evictions in the Country

22 February 2024

Micah 2: 9 –" You have evicted women from their pleasant homes and forever stripped their children of all that God would give them".

The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), Public Engagement Commission takes note of the evictions and threats to evictions that took place in the country from January to February 2024. The Government of Zimbabwe has embarked on this campaign at a time when Zimbabweans are suffering the effects of high inflation, high unemployment, increasing poverty, acute food shortages, an El Nino-induced drought, and a devastating cholera outbreak.

As the Church, we have a moral, ethical, and theological obligation to provide support, assistance and speak on behalf of those who are silenced, who become voiceless: resulting in untold suffering. The gospel asks us to assist the poor, the vulnerable, the hungry, the homeless, and sick as proclaimed: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me", (Matthew 25:40).

The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) condemns these mass land evictions and destruction of people's property that have left thousands of Zimbabweans homeless and made dispossessed Zimbabweans even more vulnerable. This rapid, ruthless, and arbitrary manner in which operation: "No to land barons and illegal settlements on state land", is being conducted. This exercise has left over 985 people convicted with 3 360 cases pending trials across the country, according to private media reports. In some areas, the settlers have had their infrastructure demolished by Local Municipal authorities, despite following resettling procedures. In other circumstances, in rural areas, some settlers paid village heads and chiefs to occupy pieces of land.

The land question ranked highest among the grievances that motivated indigenous Black people to launch the Second Chimurenga to free the country from colonial occupation. The people of Zimbabwe fought diligently and determined against the colonial regime in anticipation that they would get land for settlement, farming, and mining. It is therefore, imperative that all citizens have access to land for production as well as settlement, and those with land use it for national interest.

The Zimbabwe Council of churches is particularly concerned with the following:

Section 74, of Zimbabwe's 2013 Constitution provides that "No person may be evicted from their home, or have their home demolished, without an order of court made after considering all the relevant circumstances", hence, Section 74 protects against arbitrary eviction, requiring a court order after considering all relevant circumstances. ZCC is concerned about whether these procedures were followed before evictions. Even in settlements where court orders were made, the Church is concerned whether all relevant circumstances as mentioned in the constitution were considered as the processes are lacking transparency.

The legal framework being used for these evictions originates from the colonial era when the colonial government prevented the local people from owning land. The same laws cannot be applied to the very same people who fought for independence.

Some settlements in Masvingo RDC such as Nemamwa, Bhuka and Manyamawhich are now being considered to be illegal have been in existence for more than 20 years. This raises questions about the competencies of the local authorities to monitor and rapidly respond to illegal activities, for illegal settlements should be removed as soon as they sprout to avoid the loss of property and resources through investments that would have been done.

The political leaders have been taking a lead in settling people in urban and rural settlements. The land is being utilized as a tool to gain political mileage. The issue of non-compliance with town planning regulations was not enforced before the 2023 harmonized elections.

However, brutal evictions have been enforced in a time after elections (post election period). It is appalling to note that the same political leaders who were voted into power are not proactively assisting their constituencies affected by these land evictions and destruction of property.

Evictions increase the vulnerability of the most marginalized communities in the country, these are the people already suffering the effects of the economic crisis in the country. It is also unfortunate that in a season of crop cultivation and expected harvest, some communities unsuspecting, suffered vicious evictions. Taking the land away from them exposes them to hunger as they are left with no food. Some of them are left to live in the streets and open spaces with no proper water and sanitation facilities. This makes them more vulnerable to diarrheal diseases, and many other vices, worst when the country is already suffering from a cholera outbreak.

In light of this, we make the following recommendations:

- ZCC calls on and plead with the Government of Zimbabwe to immediately bring these evictions to a halt and have a clear roadmap to regularize as well as properly resettle those who are in illegal settlements. The land redistribution program being implemented by the government should be utilized to resettle the people.
- A Government-led Humanitarian Response Program should be promulgated for those who have already been affected by evictions which include the provision of psycho-social support, and temporary shelter with a working water and sanitation system. The government should also allocate them land since they are citizens of Zimbabwe.
- Evictions should be done according to the provisions of the Constitution of Zimbabwe and made transparent so that citizens are fully aware of the process and can participate meaningfully. Preservation of human dignity should always be considered when such programs are being designed and implemented.

- The government should develop and implement a legal framework that promotes inclusive land ownership and ensures that citizens' human rights are protected during development-induced resettlements and displacements. Legal provisions from the colonial period should be repealed as they are against the spirit of independence and sovereignty in the country.
- Political leaders, traditional leaders, and all other land barons who engaged in illicit land deals should be held accountable and face the full wrath of the law. These are the people who benefited immensely from illegally settling of innocent people while taking advantage of these, poor and vulnerable who were seeking land.
- Local authorities and urban councils are being called upon to be proactive in the provision of land through land acquisition, servicing, and provision of housing amenities. They are also called to conduct regular monitoring and surveillance to ensure that no illegal settlements are established. The local authorities are being accused of formalizing illegal settlements through revenue collections and the provision of some amenities in the settlements.
- The Government of Zimbabwe should fulfil its mandate to provide housing to citizens since shelter and accommodation are a basic human right. The government through the National Development Strategy 1 pledged to provide at least, 220 000 housing units in both rural and urban areas. Achievement of this will be crucial in resolving the issue of land ownership.
- The deteriorating economic conditions in the country have left many citizens vulnerable and unable to acquire and productively utilize land. This is pushing citizens to rely on acquiring communal land which is cheap and readily available. The challenges in the country are deep and complex. They, therefore require a more comprehensive and inclusive approach as opposed to episodic strategies such as evictions.

The Church continues to call on political leaders, government and all other stakeholders to engage in comprehensive dialogue in order to resolve the root causes of these challenges. There is a need for comprehensive dialogue on the land question, for land to be productive and used in a manner that contributes to the well-being of all Zimbabweans.

END//