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His Excellency President Olusegun Obasanjo
Chairman African Union and
President of the Republic of Nigeria
Office of the President
Aso Rock
Abuja, Federal Capital Territory
Nigeria

13 June 2005

Your Excellency,

Amnesty International is gravely concerned by the continuing silence of the Assembly of the African Union (AU) in the face of the deepening humanitarian and human rights crisis in Zimbabwe. Over the past three weeks the Government of Zimbabwe has orchestrated the widespread forced eviction of informal traders and families living in informal settlements. The mass evictions have been accompanied by the destruction of homes and livelihoods, leaving tens of thousands of people living in the open without access to adequate shelter or food, at a time when Zimbabwe is facing severe food shortages. Amnesty International has received reports of acute hunger, illness and the deaths of children forced to sleep outside in the Zimbabwean winter.

The Government of Zimbabwe has claimed that this action is intended to "clean up" urban areas and tackle illegal trade in foreign exchange. However, many of those evicted were actually living in areas designated for their use by the government and we are not aware of evidence that they were engaged in any illegal activity. Furthermore, evictions should be carried out only if they are fully in line with international human rights law. The evictions which are taking place in Zimbabwe are being carried out without notice, court orders, due process, legal protection, redress or appropriate relocation measures, as required by international law. During the forced evictions police and other members of the security forces are using excessive force – burning homes, destroying property and beating individuals.

Health care and education facilities have been torn down during the evictions. Thousands of children may be facing the abrupt end to their education. Facilities for orphans have also reportedly been destroyed. No care whatsoever has been shown for the most vulnerable. Amnesty International is also gravely concerned by reports that those made homeless in urban areas are being told they must go and live in the rural areas. No support for such relocation has been provided.

Thousands of informal traders have also been targeted in the "clean-up" exercise. They have been forcibly removed from market areas across the country. They were given no notice and, in many cases, had their goods destroyed or confiscated and were beaten by police.

Many of those arrested had licences or paid rents to local authorities. Reports indicate that more than 20,000 traders have been arrested for alleged illegal activities, but, again, there

is no evidence of widespread illegal activity.

The complete and wholesale destruction of people's homes and livelihoods constitutes a serious violation of international human rights law, and the most disturbing affront to human dignity.

Through the AU and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), in which you play such a vital role, African Heads of State and Government reaffirmed their commitment to take effective and concrete measures to uphold the rule of law and promote principles of human rights and accountability. The disparity between the principles and objectives enshrined in NEPAD and the Constitutive Act of the AU, and the reality of the situation in Zimbabwe, as experienced by millions of Zimbabweans, is blatant.

Among the objectives of the AU, which are enshrined in Article 3 of the Constitutive Act, is to "promote and protect human and peoples' rights in accordance with the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and other relevant human rights instruments". We do not believe that the AU can remain silent when so many of the rights to which African states, including Zimbabwe, have pledged themselves, are being so seriously violated in the context of the mass forced evictions in Zimbabwe. Among the rights which Amnesty International believes are currently being violated are the rights to life, property, work, education, the best attainable state of physical and mental health, as well as the rights to equal protection of the law, liberty and security of person.

An "Africa imbued with justice and peace" will never be a reality unless and until African leaders speak out publicly for the human rights of African people, no matter where on the continent those people are.

Amnesty International urges you, as the Chair of the AU Assembly to speak out and call on President Robert Mugabe to end immediately the widespread forced evictions and destruction of homes and livelihoods in Zimbabwe. We also ask that you urge President Mugabe to immediately provide assistance to those displaced and to allow national and international humanitarian organizations that are willing and able to assist to do so, ensuring that they have full and unfettered access to the victims of the forced evictions.

I look forward to your response on this very urgent matter.

Yours sincerely,

Irene Khan
Secretary General