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Africa: Forced evictions are a human rights scandal

On World Habitat Day (3 October) Amnesty International and the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) are challenging African governments to end the practice of forced evictions, describing them as one of the most widespread and unrecognised human rights violations on the continent.

Forced evictions violate international law, yet many African governments are justifying them on the grounds that they are essential for the development of infrastructure, housing and office buildings, or in preparation for international events. The tragic outcome in most of these cases is that the poorest and most vulnerable members of society are placed at even greater risk — when evictees are made homeless or are relocated.

Across Africa hundreds of thousands of people each year are forcibly evicted; in many cases they are left homeless, lose their possessions or are relocated far from sources of employment, livelihood or education. Examples from across the continent are as numerous as they are distressing.

More than 1 million people have been forcibly evicted in **Nigeria** since 2000. In April 2005 some 3,000 residents were forcibly evicted from their houses in the Makoko area of Lagos, on the basis of a court order, issued in 2000, granting ownership of the land to a private family. Houses, churches, and medical clinics were demolished as part of the forced evictions and the officials involved kicked and beat residents, including five young children.

Starting in May 2005, the government of **Zimbabwe** orchestrated a programme of mass forced evictions and demolition of homes and livelihoods that has directly affected at least 700,000 people, and indirectly affected more than 2 million others. Homes, schools and clinics were bulldozed and torched, and entire communities displaced. The government has attempted to forcibly relocate people to rural areas — where food shortages are already causing considerable suffering. Hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) now face a humanitarian crisis.

In **Sudan**, approximately 1,800,000 IDPs, driven from their homes by prolonged conflict and marginalisation, reside in and around the capital Khartoum. Despite strong objections from the international community, the government continues to arbitrarily and forcibly relocate IDPs to locations lacking even the most basic essential services. Criminal activity and clean up efforts are often cited as justification for these acts. Most recently, on 17 August 2005, armed police surrounded the Shikan IDP camp, located in Omdurman, Khartoum, loading over 700 families into lorries — with no consultation — and transporting them to far flung areas with limited or no essential services.

In early 2005, amid an international uproar, the government of **Kenya** threatened to evict over 3,000 families from the Mau Forest. In May 2005, despite a court order temporarily suspending the

eviction, the government evicted more than 300 of these families, all of whom claimed to have title deeds. Starting on 13 June 2005, over 50,000 people were evicted and their homes and several granaries were destroyed.

Since forced evictions in Luanda, **Angola**, started in 2001, thousands of families have been forcibly evicted from their homes. Some have been relocated to areas 40 km away, where they lack access to schools, health care or employment. In the latest evictions on 28-29 September 2005 in Bairro Cidadania, 200 families were left homeless after the national police forcibly evicted them from their homes which were then demolished.

In **Ghana**, some 30,000 persons continue to face forced eviction from the Agbogbloshie community in Accra.

But there have also been positive developments in Africa.

A landmark decision of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights on forced evictions in Nigeria in October 2001 contributed to international jurisprudence in relation to the right to adequate housing. The Commission declared that in carrying out forced evictions, the Nigerian Government had violated the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

In some countries communities and other groups are coming together to take action. Groups in Kenya, for example, scored a major victory in the first half of 2004, convincing the Government of the National Rainbow Coalition to shelve its plans to evict hundreds of thousands of shack dwellers living on land reserved for new roads or too close to railway tracks, roads and power lines in the informal settlements of Nairobi. Since then, Nairobi community groups and the national and international organisations that support them have been formulating and, in some minor but nonetheless significant cases, have started implementing alternative *eviction-free* development plans for some of the affected areas.

Africa leaders need to build on such positive developments and work for an end to forced evictions across Africa.

Amnesty International and COHRE are calling on African Governments to:

Publicly acknowledge that an adequate standard of living, including adequate housing, is a human right.

Publicly commit to an immediate halt on forced evictions until such time as appropriate legislation is passed which prohibits forced evictions. In the meantime, any other eviction should only be carried out in the most exceptional circumstances and after all feasible alternatives have been explored.

Furthermore, evictions must also be based on a court order and after genuine consultation with those affected. Finally, adequate alternative land and housing should be provided to all affected persons. Give instructions to all relevant authorities that any evictions may only be carried out in full compliance with international human rights law and standards.

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