

Zimbabwean churches form coalition to aid demolition victims: Government campaign has driven out 700,000

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An alliance of church groups in Zimbabwe is forming a coalition to aid victims of the government's "drive out trash" campaign that the United Nations estimates has cost 700,000 Zimbabweans their homes or livelihoods or both.

"Churches have formed a broad-based ecumenical body in the aftermath of the clean-up operation," Charles Muchechetere of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe told Ecumenical News International, the Geneva-based religious news agency.

"The three general secretaries of the country's main church organizations will meet regularly to address the imbalances created by the clean-up operation," he added.

In addition to EFZ, the coalition includes the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference.

The government says the clean-up campaign was designed to clear slums and to eliminate the informal markets in the country's cities.

Once considered the breadbasket of Africa, Zimbabwe has been descending into economic chaos for several years. Many blame the turmoil on President Robert Mugabe's land reform policies, exacerbated by a severe drought and the HIV/AIDS pandemic sweeping sub-Saharan Africa.

In July, the UN's World Food Program estimated that a third of the population faces food shortages. Inflation has been soaring.

Meanwhile, the South African Council of Churches has been attempting since August 1 to send 37 tons of food to Zimbabwe. The Zimbabwean government has refused to let the food in, saying it needs assurances that none of the food is from genetically modified crops.

Ron Steele, a spokesman for the SACC, told reporters that “everybody is very frustrated” over the delay and council leaders have taken the issue up with South African government leaders.

The South African government has been generally supportive of Zimbabwe and Mugabe, though it was highly critical of parliamentary elections earlier this year and of the clean-up campaign.

“I do not need to remind you that the consequences of a meltdown in Zimbabwe will actually be disastrous for the whole of southern Africa,” said Anglican archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane of Cape Town, South Africa. *-Religion News Service*