

Zimbabwe evictions of urban poor decried; Methodist deported: Pastors call on government to end crackdown

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Religious and human rights groups, along with a top UN official, are calling on the Zimbabwe government to end its campaign of evicting the urban poor and destroying their shacks and market stalls.

An estimated 200,000 people have lost their homes and another 30,000 have been arrested or detained since the government began its “cleanup” May 19, according to Miloon Kothari, a UN expert on housing.

“This kind of mass eviction drive is a classic case where the intention appears to be that Harare become a city for the rich, for the middle class, for those that were well off . . . and the poor are pushed away,” Kothari told a June 3 news conference in Geneva.

“We have a very grave crisis on our hands,” he said. “It is quite clearly a gross violation” of human rights.

On June 6 a former volunteer geography instructor at the United Methodist-related Africa University in Mutare was deported following his arrest for filming police as they demolished the shacks in that city, according to United Methodist News Service.

The news service identified him as Howard S. Gilman, 68, a member of a United Methodist church in Montgomery, Maryland. According to news reports abroad, Gilman spent ten days in jail and could have been imprisoned for a longer time for illegally photographing police discharging their duties. Instead he was fined for violating censorship laws and overstaying his visa.

“We are deeply saddened by the situation,” said Andra Stevens, information director for Africa University, which last month gave degrees to 391 graduates from 14

African nations. Gilman, who ended his association with the campus last August, also “gave help to marginalized people in Zimbabwe, particularly orphans.”

Zimbabwe’s economy has shrunk 50 percent in the past five years and the unemployment rate is estimated to be 70 percent. Agriculture, which once made Zimbabwe the breadbasket of Africa, has collapsed since autocratic president Robert Mugabe, 81, began a controversial program of seizing white-owned farms and turning them over to blacks.

Since the country’s March 31 parliamentary elections, the economy has been in a free fall, leaving store shelves empty.

The Zimbabwe National Pastors Conference on June 2 called on the government to end the crackdown, dubbed Operation Restore Order. “The visibility of these street traders is simply a manifestation of the economic depression which we are experiencing. No amount of police action will sweep this current reality under the carpet.” *-Religion News Service*