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## Zimbabwe living conditions "as bad as it can get"

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GENEVA (Reuters) - Living conditions have worsened in Zimbabwe, where most of the 700,000 people who lost homes or businesses in mass evictions last year were still struggling to find shelter, a United Nations housing expert said on Thursday.

Miloon Kothari, the U.N. special rapporteur on adequate housing, said most of those displaced by President Robert Mugabe's May 2005 eviction campaign remained homeless, in resettlement camps or were living without food, safe water or sanitation.

"It is as bad as it can get," Kothari said.

He took aim at the international community for what he called a "shocking" lack of pressure on Zimbabwe.

"The political leaders continue to be silent. They are saying there is quiet diplomacy, but you can't have quiet diplomacy for a year with no results," he said.

"The international community seems to have forgotten the people of Zimbabwe," he told reporters at U.N. headquarters in Geneva.

The Mugabe government used police and bulldozers to demolish street stalls and residences in urban shantytowns in its "Operation Restore Order" eviction campaign.

While authorities said it was aimed at cracking down on black market activity, critics decried the evictions as part of a political swipe against the largely urban supporters of Zimbabwe's main opposition party.

Kothari said some people evicted last year had returned to the site of their previous homes, making them vulnerable to a new round-up by the government.

"We have information that another round of evictions is imminent," he said.

Kothari said he was "extremely concerned" the government had not heeded calls from the United Nations to halt further demolitions and pay compensation for property that was unlawfully destroyed.

He said Zimbabwe's extensive human suffering, combined with difficult economic conditions including the world's highest inflation rates, had compounded the country's problems.

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Kothari's recent targets have included: a highway project in the Pakistani megacity of Karachi which could eventually leave 250,000 shanty-town dwellers homeless and a ongoing urban renewal programme in Mumbai, India, that has razed the homes of an estimated 350,000 people.

They also included other programmes affecting hundreds of thousands of people in Angola, Cambodia and the Philippines.

"We're seeing the formation of apartheid cities all over the world," said Kothari, as a result of efforts to drive the poor from what has often turned into prime urban real estate, particularly in countries which are emerging from conflict.

"I think that is a very grave portent for the future because it will certainly lead to more conflict," he said.

Kothari has spotlighted the impact on rural residents of high-profile dam construction projects in China and India.

The developed world is also at fault -- and not just because of its investments or aid which can end up being used for development projects that hurt the poor -- Kothari said.

He pointed to expulsions of Roma communities in Russia, as well as the evictions from and demolition of public housing in Canada and the United States.

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