

**Briefing by John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator  
on the Humanitarian Situation in Zimbabwe**

**12 June 2008**

Thank you, Mr. President, for the Council's invitation to provide a briefing on the humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe. I will pay particular attention to the developments since the first round of national elections held on 29 March. This period has been characterized by significant political tensions and violence, has led to loss of lives, intimidation and harassment of NGO staff, and has reduced humanitarian operations and space to operate.

As Council members are aware, before the elections Zimbabwe was already facing a deep social and economic crisis, characterised by rapid economic decline and hyper-inflation of 170,000%, collapsing social services, food insecurity and the devastating effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Two million people are dependent on humanitarian assistance, and as many as four million are considered vulnerable and in need of help.

In preparing for the electoral period, many humanitarian agencies had maximised aid distributions at the beginning of March, then scaled back operations. They had intended to resume operations after the electoral results were announced, but the delay in releasing the results led humanitarian actors to continue to keep their operations to a minimum. When UN agencies and NGOs believed they could not wait any longer and began to move out into the field again, they were met with significant restrictions. A number of NGOs reported acts of harassment and intimidation from authorities at central and district levels, some community leaders, war veterans, members of the security services and the militia. Several NGO staff were briefly detained. While UN agencies did not face the same range of problems, UN officials were informally told that some operations, particularly food distributions, should not be undertaken during the presidential run-off period. By 12 May, access problems had been reported by UN agencies and NGOs in 24 out of Zimbabwe's 81 districts.

The situation worsened further on 4 June, when the Minister for Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare issued a directive instructing "all Private Voluntary Organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations to suspend all field operations until further notice," on the grounds that "a number of NGOs involved in humanitarian work are breaching the terms and conditions of their registration." The day before, President Mugabe, addressing the Rome Summit on Climate Change and Food Security, had claimed that what he called "western funded NGOs" were using "food as a political weapon with which to campaign against the Government, particularly in the rural areas."

Mr. President,

I and my UN colleagues believe that our NGO partners were acting fully in line with the core humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. There is no question of them attempting to use food for political purposes. I do not believe that this deplorable decision can possibly be in the interests of the most vulnerable people in Zimbabwe, and it has the potential to do very significant damage by depriving them of much-needed

humanitarian assistance at a particularly difficult time. As well as running their own extensive relief activities, NGOs are primary partners for UN agencies, and are responsible for implementing large parts of UN programmes at the field level.

We estimate that two million people are directly affected by this decision. This includes as many as 500,000 children who are currently not receiving the health care, HIV/AIDS support, education assistance and food that they require. Many of these children are orphans. As of last week, for example, one major programme for orphans coordinated by UNICEF – reaching 185,000 orphans through 25 NGOs – can no longer operate. It is therefore vital that the Government rescind this decision, as we have made clear publicly and privately. In a meeting today in Harare, Government officials indicated that they would clarify the directive, suggesting that it might be somewhat relaxed and was indeed only temporary. They also made clear that the suspension did not apply to the churches. We will continue to press for full and unfettered access, including interaction with affected communities, and wait to see these relatively encouraging words turned into reality as quickly as possible.

Mr. President,

The suspension of NGO activities comes at a time when food security in Zimbabwe is deteriorating, and an increasing number of people are becoming even more vulnerable. Although official figures are not yet available, all indications are that this year's food situation will be even worse than last year, when 4.1 million people were in need of food aid. Initial indications from the joint FAO/WFP/Government Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission, concluded last month, suggest that the total cereal production this year will be about 470,000 metric tonnes – just 28 percent of the country's annual consumption of 1.9 million metric tonnes. This therefore leaves a deficit of approximately 1.4 million metric tonnes. The Government has itself acknowledged that the 2008 agricultural season will be disappointing, and has suggested that up to 60% of the population would need food assistance.

While deficits have been met in the past through a combination of Government imports and food aid, this year's deficit is not only expected to be substantially larger, but will also come at a time when the economy is significantly weaker. Unless imports and international assistance are made available, households in urban areas and districts in the south and the west will face severe food access problems beginning this month, with similar shortages developing throughout the country in the following months.

Mr. President,

It is my profound hope that the current suspension of NGO operations will indeed not extend beyond the current period in the run-up to the elections. An extended suspension could have disastrous effects. But, in the current difficult situation, even the suspension of NGO field operations for three weeks has serious consequences. For example, all WFP food assistance distributed by NGO partners has ceased, preventing 314,000 of the most vulnerable people in the country from receiving food during the month of June. The suspension has also affected plans by a network of NGOs to feed an additional 300,000 people in June - leaving a total of 614,000 hungry. The people affected are some of the most food insecure in Zimbabwe, including orphans, the elderly, the disabled, school children, HIV-positive people bed-ridden at home, and patients receiving anti-retroviral therapy treatment for HIV-AIDS or treatment for tuberculosis.

The lack of food is bound to further aggravate health problems for these 614,000 people, and lead to greater malnutrition. These developments also compound an already desperate situation in the health sector, where the continuing large-scale migration of skilled medical personnel, combined with the lack of equipment, essential drugs and supplies, have severely affected the functioning of the health system. The suspension of NGO activities in the health field will inevitably worsen this situation further.

I am particularly concerned by the plight of the 1.4 million people living with HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe, of whom 100,000 are currently receiving anti-retroviral treatments. Lack of access makes it difficult to assess the impact of these recent developments, but NGOs are already reporting a lack of drugs, particularly in rural areas. Another concern is that populations displaced by violence will no longer be able to access AIDS treatment.

In 2007, NGOs also assisted 1.5 million people in the water and sanitation sector. Some humanitarian partners have already had to reduce or stop all activities due to restricted access and intimidation, and this in a situation where poor water and sanitation have already led to persistent outbreaks of cholera and other waterborne diseases. Between January and April this year, 982 cases of cholera were reported, with 129 deaths.

Since 29 March, the UN Country Team has continued to receive reports of widening politically motivated violence, with partners reporting incidents in 49 out of 81 districts (60%). The violence continues to result in deaths and injury and destruction of homes, properties and livelihoods. According to reports compiled by local NGOs, for example, the post-election violence has led to 3,000 people being either beaten or injured, and has claimed the lives of 57 people. Acts of violence are reportedly perpetrated by security forces, youth militia, war veterans and supporters of both Zanu-PF and the MDC. The political violence is leading to increased displacement and movement towards urban areas.

In the face of these challenges, the UN and its partners have been making every effort to sustain current activities and to travel into the field whenever possible. For example, we are currently providing assistance to approximately 30,000 people who have been internally displaced due to violence. However, restrictions on movement make it impossible to estimate properly the number of those who have been displaced in the last few months.

Mr. President,

Members of the Council will also be aware of reports of population movements from Zimbabwe into neighbouring countries. Although cross-border movement is not a new phenomenon in southern Africa, the quantity and nature of the movements have changed as the political, economic, social and humanitarian conditions in Zimbabwe have deteriorated further. While most of the Zimbabweans entering neighbouring countries do not seek protection as refugees, their movement cannot be characterised simply as “economic migration.” UNHCR, for example, considers the latest movements to be forced displacement.

While the outflow of Zimbabweans to neighbouring countries is difficult to monitor, and we have few confirmed figures, humanitarian partners operating in border areas are observing

changes in the size and profile of population movements. In the past we had tended to see single men of working age crossing the border. Now there are increasing reports of large groups, including entire families and elderly people, joining the exodus. South Africa has been the main recipient of mixed population inflows, although increased cross-border movements have also been recorded in Mozambique, Zambia and Botswana.

Estimates of the number of Zimbabweans in South Africa vary greatly, and reliable statistics are not available, with the widely accepted estimate being around 800,000. Some NGOs in South Africa and Mozambique, who have been interviewing migrants, report that an increased number of Zimbabweans say that they are migrating due to fear of political intimidation. Botswana and Zambia are also for the first time receiving Zimbabweans seeking political asylum.

The situation of Zimbabweans in neighbouring countries is itself highly vulnerable, as many of them are going where resources are already scarce. Recent assessments in South Africa, for example, show high levels of vulnerability among Zimbabweans there, especially among those displaced by the recent violence. The recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa have hardly helped. Before these attacks around 14,000 Zimbabweans were already being repatriated from South Africa every month. Since then we have reports of additional numbers fleeing the violence and returning to Zimbabwe, while there are unconfirmed reports of thousands more having fled South Africa to Mozambique.

UN agencies have for some time been preparing contingency plans to prepare for the possibility of increased population movements from Zimbabwe, and we are taking all necessary measures to ensure that we can help affected Governments to respond, in particular the Government of South Africa, with whom we are working very closely. Unfortunately, the prospect of further violence and deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe significantly increase the possibility of larger population movements, both internally and into neighbouring countries.

Mr. President,

Allow me to say a word also about funding for humanitarian operations. In November 2007, 42 UN agencies and NGOs appealed for US\$317 million to provide urgently needed aid to the country in 2008. Nearly halfway through 2008, the Appeal has been only 19% funded. More resources are urgently needed, given the increasingly difficult humanitarian situation in the country. I very much hope that humanitarian funding is not being held back because of the difficult political situation, which would be to punish the population for something quite outside their control.

The situation in Zimbabwe is extremely difficult, from all points of view, and humanitarian agencies have little room in which to work at the best of times, despite all their efforts. I hope the Council will continue to urge all actors to take all possible measures to reduce the prevalence of violence, and in particular will urge the Government to rescind restrictions on the work of the NGO community, to ensure unfettered access to vulnerable populations for all agencies, and to ensure the security of all humanitarian workers.

For my own part, I appeal to the Zimbabwe Government very strongly to rescind in particular the decision preventing the NGOs from operating as soon as possible, and to remove all other restrictions too. This is not a political request. The issue is humanitarian and stems directly from the responsibility of any Government to meet the needs of its people and facilitate the work of those who are trying to ensure a timely and effective humanitarian response to those needs.

Thank you.