
June 4, 2008

In a Crackdown, Zimbabwe Curbs Aid Groups

By [CELIA W. DUGGER](#)

JOHANNESBURG — Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Zimbabweans — orphans and old people, the sick and the down and out — have lost access to food and other basic humanitarian assistance as their government has clamped down on international aid groups it says are backing the political opposition, relief agencies say.

In recent days, [CARE](#), one of the largest nonprofit groups working in the country, has been ordered by the Zimbabwean government to suspend all its operations, which help 500,000 of the country's most vulnerable people. This month alone, CARE would have fed more than 110,000 people in schools, orphanages, old-age homes and in various programs, it said.

But the aid restrictions go far beyond any one group. Muktar Farah, deputy head of the [United Nations](#) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in [Zimbabwe](#), said Tuesday that millions of people had lost assistance because of what he called “the shrinking of humanitarian space.”

“NGOs have been told to scale down or stop operations throughout the country,” he said, referring to nongovernmental organizations.

Zimbabwe's president, [Robert Mugabe](#), speaking on Tuesday at a United Nations food conference in Rome, accused nongovernmental organizations of interfering in politics and contended that the West had conspired “to cripple Zimbabwe's economy” and bring about “illegal regime change.”

“Funds are being channeled through nongovernmental organizations to opposition political parties, which are a creation of the West,” he said. “These Western-funded NGOs also use food as a political weapon with which to campaign against government, especially in the rural areas.”

On Friday and Monday, representatives of aid groups were summoned by administrators in four districts and instructed to cease all work in the field until a bitterly contested presidential runoff was held on June 27 between Mr. Mugabe, in power for 28 years, and the opposition leader, [Morgan Tsvangirai](#).

Aid groups expect such summons to come from a growing list of districts.

In a summary of one such meeting, compiled by an aid group and provided to The New York Times, representatives of Mr. Mugabe's office, the police and the army were present as the groups were warned not to say anything publicly about their withdrawal and not to conduct any operations at night.

Aid workers and human rights groups say the restrictions are meant to prevent them from witnessing attacks on opposition supporters, often in nighttime raids, amid the government's increasingly violent and deadly crackdown on those it sees as a threat to its hold on power.

The [United Nations Children's Fund](#) said Monday that 10,000 children had been displaced by the violence, scores had been beaten and some schools had been taken over by pro-government forces and turned into centers of torture. In a statement, it expressed worry about the welfare of hundreds of thousands of vulnerable and orphaned children, given how many aid groups have restricted their operations "due to threats, requests to do so by authorities or general 'concern at current uncertainties.' "

Zimbabwean political analysts and civic leaders say that Mr. Mugabe and ZANU-PF, his governing party, are themselves seeking to use food as a political weapon in a country, once the region's bread basket, where hunger now afflicts millions. The government recently bought 600,000 tons of corn. By barring NGOs from giving out food in some areas, the governing party controls food distribution and can use it as an inducement to win support.

"They've always been willing to forgo the needs of the people in their political interests," said Fambai Ngirande, a spokesman for Zimbabwe's National Association of Nongovernmental Organizations, which has more than 1,000 members.

Eldred Masunungure, a political scientist at the University of Zimbabwe, noted that while the opposition defeated large numbers of ZANU-PF politicians in the March 29 election, the government was not allowing the newly elected local officials to take office until after the presidential runoff. It is through these local politicians, he said, that the party determines who is eligible for [food aid](#) and assistance from among the multitudes who are too poor to afford medicine and school fees for their children, among other things.

As Zimbabwe's economy has collapsed, unemployment has risen to more than 80 percent, and hyperinflation has made food ever more costly, Zimbabweans have engaged in an ever more desperate struggle just to survive.

"Zimbabwe is a huge patronage system, and ZANU-PF drives that system," Mr. Masunungure said. "Food distribution is not only a matter of life and death to recipients, but it's a strategic political resource that the government deploys to promote its political agenda."

In CARE's case, cabinet ministers have accused its staff of distributing election pamphlets and encouraging people to vote for the opposition and against ZANU-PF. CARE vehemently denies the charges and says the government has not offered any specific evidence to back up the allegations.

"CARE has strict policies against political involvement and categorically denies that the organization has encouraged or tolerated any political activity," Kenneth Walker, Africa communications manager for CARE International, said in an interview. "CARE requested, but has not yet received, details of any allegations, including names, dates and locations."

The organization was told of the suspension on May 28, and it will remain in place until the government's investigation of the charges is completed. CARE has told its staff of 300 in Zimbabwe to remain at home pending further notice. Since it began working there in 1992, CARE has channeled more than \$100 million in development assistance and disaster relief to the country.

Since the disputed March 29 presidential election, in which Mr. Mugabe came in second to his rival, Mr. Tsvangirai, the government has been cracking down on many civic and nonprofit groups, as well as the opposition.

In Monday's online edition of the state-owned newspaper, The Herald, Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa, who lost his seat in Parliament in the March election but remains in office, was quoted as saying that nongovernmental organizations, civic groups, churches and the opposition were colluding with Britain to bring down the Mugabe government.

Civic leaders and aid workers say the restrictions on humanitarian assistance have been increasing in recent days. The groups affected by prohibitions on working in various rural districts include Plan International, Save the Children and Mercy Corps, aid workers say.

Save the Children said that in Binga District it was unable to provide services to 60,000 children, many of whom are disabled or orphaned, or whose parents have AIDS. The children have lost access to counseling, preschool education, free meals and vocational training.

"The longer it goes on, the greater the detrimental impact it has on children," said Sarah Jacobs, spokeswoman for Save the Children U.K. "For example, if we're not able to provide food at early childhood centers, then the children won't come to school."

In contrast, World Vision, which assists more than one million Zimbabweans a month, says it has been unaffected by the crackdown, though it said it had lowered its profile. "W.V. Zimbabwe has minimized exposure to risk by maintaining minimal activities in the field and sticking to activities that have little 'community mobilization,'" the group said in a statement on Tuesday.

Elisabeth Rosenthal contributed reporting from Rome, and Graham Bowley from New York.