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## The plight of farm workers in Zimbabwe



Since 2000, Zimbabwe has been facing intense challenges as a result of land grabs which robbed the nation of its source of foreign currency at the same time internally displacing close to 40,000 families, according to a report released by Refugees International (2004). Fresh farm invasions which began soon after the inauguration of Prime Minister, Morgan Tsvangirai on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 2009 have equally dealt a heavy blow on farming communities in Zimbabwe. The General Agricultural and Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) information department reports continued disturbances in over 50 farms with data revealing that more than 700 families have been displaced since the onset of the invasions. As in any crisis, vulnerable groups, among them, women, children and the disabled remain the worst affected. Those displaced were forced to seek refuge from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), GAPWUZ and well wishers. Such a scenario is hazardous especially when the country is moving towards winter and those displaced have nowhere to go and will be forced to sleep outdoors.

The plight of farm workers in Zimbabwe goes far beyond the farm invasions and is one which is important but often times ignored. In farming communities, there is an imminent humanitarian catastrophe yet the media and donor communities continue to turn a blind eye on this community.

The situation for those who remain at the farms is equally tragic. GAPWUZ states that the farm invasions have led to change of ownership, disrupting production in the farms. These conflicts have ultimately culminated in delays in payments of workers by the farmers. Such a scenario paints a gloomy picture on the ability of farm workers to sustain themselves.

The National Employment Council (NEC) pegged the minimum wages for farm workers at US\$10.40 a month, an amount which cannot even buy 20kgs of mealie-meal. Despite selling their produce in foreign currency, farmers are resisting paying workers' remuneration in hard currency arguing that they cannot afford. The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), following an independent research, pegged the poverty datum line (PDL) at more than US\$400 as of March 2009. This means that farm workers are earning far below the PDL and as such cannot afford basics.

The cholera pandemic which, since August 2008 has ravished communities claiming the lives of over 4000 Zimbabweans has spread to farming areas. GAPWUZ notes that failure by most NGOs to conduct cholera awareness campaigns in farming communities has led to farm workers contracting the disease but owing to lack of knowledge, ignoring it. No segregated data has so far been released on the number of deaths in farming communities.

It is imperative that the Government and humanitarian agencies urgently address the plight of farm workers who are at the receiving end of the crisis currently affecting the country. The humanitarian situation in farms continues to worsen and if uncontained has the potential of drastically injuring prospects of Zimbabwe's economic recovery.