

Human rights violations in Zimbabwe

Government destruction of communities leads to criminal investigation with the help of DigitalGlobe imagery

Today the world faces an unparalleled amount of manmade and natural humanitarian disasters. In 2004, these disasters claimed tens of thousands of lives worldwide. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina alone destroyed 300,000 homes, displacing 770,000 people, and requiring a massive aid effort by the international community. And the destruction continues. Space based imagery offers remote surveillance of groups at risk for human rights abuse. If reported early and effectively, satellite imagery information could mitigate against humanitarian disasters. DigitalGlobe's IKONOS imagery reveals how necessary this monitoring is.

In 2006, it provided proof of alleged human rights violations in Zimbabwe where the government destroyed an entire community in Porta Farm. Fifteen years before the forced eviction at Porta Farm, it was a thriving community established along the northern edge of Lake Chivero. The Zimbabwe government began Operation Murambatsvina (Restore Order) in May 2005. This was a program of mass forced evictions and demolition of homes and businesses. The government carried out Operation Murambatsvina in the winter and during a period of food shortage. This increased the hysteria. One UN report estimated the number displaced to be 700,000. In late June, during a several day period, the government instituted forced demolitions at Porta Farm. Local human rights monitors reported that during the disorganized demolition several deaths occurred, including those of children. Bulldozers executed the main demolition process at the end of July 2005.

On May 20, 1997 conclusions by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended "that appropriate measure be taken in order to more effectively guaranteed the right to housing and in particular to ensure that no forced evictions are carried out without alternative housing being offered". Dr. Chris Lavers used DigitalGlobe satellite imagery and several new image processing methods to enhance the quality of imagery and quantify the size of the demolished area, number of dwellings destroyed, and approximate number of people directly affected by displacement and the dwelling density. Dr. Lavers used a simple image processing package to optimize the contrast across the extracted images. The resolution of the panchromatic black and white image from IKONOS is 1 meter, sufficient resolution to provide detailed quality mapping of the area in question. Researchers are currently working to confirm the number of dwellings present previously and to generate a map specifying destroyed buildings. The high resolution imaging depicts building and streets in the first image which enables easy interpretation and will serve as the baseline for future detailed mapping. DigitalGlobe imagery will be available for the International Criminal Court and Amnesty International to provide evidence of the extent of the humanitarian disaster and alleged violations of human rights abuse.

Learn more about Porta Farm and Human Rights at www.amnestyusa.org



DigitalGlobe satellite image of Porta Farm, each red dot symbolizes a destroyed structure



Porta Farm before and after destruction