

Monday, August 28, 2017



Spaces for Youth Development and Social Change

Spaces for Change (S4C)

GOVERNOR ROCHAS POKOROCHAS, STOP OWERRI MARKET DEMOLITIONS NOW!

On the morning of Saturday, August 26, 2017, bulldozers accompanied by a horde of armed security operatives, acting on the orders of Imo State Governor, Rochas Okorochoa, stormed Eke-Ukwu Owerri Market, and forcefully evicted the traders, demolished their shops and destroyed wares worth millions of Naira. Security operatives, specifically, military men from the 34 Artillery Brigade, Obinze, deployed to maintain law and order during the forceful demolition of the market, shot indiscriminately into the air to prevent any resistance to the demolitions. In the process, operatives allegedly shot a ten year old boy, Somtochukwu Ibeanusi, who was reportedly trying to assist his parents to evacuate wares trapped inside their shop. A number of Owerri natives who dared to resist the demolitions were shot at, killing two persons, while injuring three others. Thousands of traders have lost their livelihoods at a time Nigeria is battling to exit an economic recession.

SPACES FOR CHANGE strongly condemns the sudden invasion of the market on Saturday morning and the extreme use of force that characterised the demolition exercise, leading to loss of human lives, injury and riots in parts of the city. Particularly distasteful is Imo State Government's spiteful media campaign denying the deaths, the injuries and playing down the scale of human suffering resulting from the forced evictions and demolitions executed without compensation, without meaningful consultation with local traders and without adequate relocation plans. SPACES FOR CHANGE confirmed that the slain boy lives at 9 Oguamanam Street, Owerri, and that the incident occurred on Multichoice Line in the market. SPACES FOR CHANGE further confirms that 3 persons died during the demolitions on Saturday and three others were seriously wounded, and are currently hospitalised. A journalist told SPACES FOR CHANGE that a government aide, Kingsley Uju, allegedly ordered his men to beat him, take his gadget and delete all the images of the demolition stored on his phone.

Eke-Ukwu Owerri Market, located along Douglas Road Owerri, is the biggest and most popular trading center in the state, attracting traders and shoppers from different parts of the country. Ekeukwu Owerri market is also the traditional and ancestral market of the Owerri people, established long before Nigeria's Independence in 1960. Recently, Imo Governor, Rochas Okorochoa, announced plans to relocate the market to a new site, which is presently under construction. In radio and television announcements, the state government has ordered traders to start buying up the news shops in the new site. Interviews with local traders reveal that the shops are prohibitive, and sold at costs they cannot afford. Not only that, the market is still under construction, lacking adequate infrastructure and the needed conducive environment for robust commercial operations. *'My shop is all I have. It has now been destroyed. I simply moving back to my village because I cannot afford to buy the new shops in the new site'*, Mrs. Eunice Mba, widow, told SPACES FOR CHANGE.

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Since May 2015, an unceasing string of demolition exercises has raged through the State in the name of urban renewal. From Wetheral to Douglas Road, to Ikenegbu, to Aladinma, to Orji Road, to Amakohia, to Akwakuma, and many other locations, agony and massive human suffering trail these inhumane exercises. At present, the demolitions have affected businesses, residential buildings, schools, churches and other private enterprises. Most affected persons, groups and communities were not served appropriate notices nor consulted by the state government's physical and urban planning authorities prior to the demolitions.

The majority of the demolition exercises occurred in defiance of court orders as well as pending litigation before the court of law. In September 2016, Eke-Ukwu Market traders approached the court for justice. An Imo State High Court restrained the state government from destroying, relocating or tampering with Eke-Ukwu Market. The Governor went ahead to demolish the market in total disdain for the court order. Similarly, Governor Rochas had in July 2017, demolished Shell Camp Quarters, inhabited by serving and retired lecturers of Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, despite a subsisting court order. Not only are court orders brazenly flouted, there is substantial evidence that the cleared land are not used for any development purposes, but rather, reallocated to family members and political cronies.

Demolitions targeted at markets have been witnessed across the country. In many cases, supermalls, especially SHOPRITE superstores, have sprung up in the city centers shortly before or after the market demolitions, giving rise to speculations that that the market removal agenda may not be unconnected with the capitalist pursuits of corporate actors and their state collaborators. In Imo State, many households wholly depend on the income sourced from informal trade and artisanal activities. These widespread demolitions are insensitive to local economic realities, while too many of them have been carried out in contravention of due process requirements laid out in the Nigerian 1999 Constitution and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

SPACES FOR CHANGE is urging the Imo State government to immediately halt all forced evictions and demolitions of markets, people's homes, churches, schools and businesses without recourse to due process and the rule of law. We particularly demand the Imo State government to pay compensation to owners of properties already destroyed and provide relief in the form of alternative housing and/or fair compensation to all residents previously evicted or whose homes or real properties have been demolished. We specifically call on the National Human Rights Commission to launch an independent investigation into the August 26, 2017 demolitions with a view to identifying the killers of Imo citizens and bring them to justice. We also call on all national and international human rights groups, the media and well-meaning Nigerians to press on the Governor Rochas Okorocha's administration to discontinue his market demolition policy and ensure the urban renewal agenda has a human face.

Signed:

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