

BRIEF RECOLLECTION OF A VISIT TO POR HARCOURT DURING ON-GOING DEMOLITIONS

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SERAC was in Port Harcourt recently to both gather information, and to have a feel of the undercurrents and machinations underlying the ongoing demolitions in Port Harcourt.

During the February 9-12, 2009 mission, SERAC issued a press release and convened a press briefing in Port Harcourt urging the Rivers State government (RSG) to halt the then scheduled demolitions of Abonema Wharf Road, Azikiwe Street, Ojoto Street, Iloabuchi Street, Gambia/Anyama Lane and Njemanze/Abonnema Wharf waterfronts and their environs, until all sectoral interests are identified, addressed or remedied. The River State government ignored this appeal and went ahead to commence the demolition exercise. As a matter of fact, we watched the bulldozers level # 16 Abonema Wharf Road.

On site and off-site investigation and findings gathered during our February mission revealed sharp divisions between landlords and tenants spurned by what was perceived by the latter as non-inclusive trends that may compromise the potentials of the Rivers State Urban Renewal Programme. Though we got official confirmation that the Rivers State government (RSG) had purchased the entire Abonema and waterfront area from their owners, it was apparent that this happened without counterpart arrangements for ensuring that existing tenancy, lease or other obligations on these properties have been fully discharged. Consequently, the tenants, under the banner of National Union of Tenants of Nigeria instituted an action in court to ventilate their grievances, but this effort couldn't save the evictions. It also does appear that the RSG ignored a well-settled legal principle that the grant of leave, in cases of fundamental human rights, operates as a stay on all action by parties pending the determination of the substantive suit.

SERAC locates these findings within the broader context of the general failure of the State to allow local participation in decision-making processes affecting their rights and interests. Seldom if ever are communities consulted prior to the setting-up of major development projects. When they are, the process is arbitrary, they are not documented, and most promises made are not respected or monitored for implementation.

Another interesting dimension is that the demolitions may have been orchestrated to pave way for private business interests to flourish. This is one aspect we are yet to consolidate with further investigatory research and evidence. In other words, additional research and systematic data collection will be required for credible advocacy to take place.

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