

Zim refugees flood SA's inner cities

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The river of Zimbabwean refugees, mainly fleeing the economic meltdown in their country, is bursting its banks in the middle of Johannesburg and Pretoria.

In the vestibule of Johannesburg's Central Methodist Church there is a plaque in memory of those church members who died during the two world wars - and all around it, ironically, is a scene that seems straight out of the grainy black-and-white footage of battered refugees trapped somewhere during the Second World War.

About 1 500 refugees, mainly men but also women and infants, 90 percent of whom are Zimbabwean, are living in the stairwells, passages, rooms and offices of the three floors of the church building in Pritchard Street, Johannesburg.

'But these were legal crossings'

Paul Verryn, the Methodist bishop of Johannesburg, said that the situation had been "bad" since January but that in the past few weeks, after shelves had emptied and food had started running out in Zimbabwe, "we started feeling the effect of that right here, in the shape of people".

Each piece of cold stone floor in the building is someone's living and sleeping space. Teachers, carpenters, lawyers, accountants and philosophers slept in the church building on any night, Verryn said.

The stench of unwashed human bodies - ablution facilities are limited - is overpowering and in the nave of the church, where Verryn officiated at his weekly "refugees' meeting", it was difficult to hear his and others' voices above the incessant, grating sound of hacking coughs.

"If you think this is dire, try our church in Marabastad in Pretoria," said Verryn. "There the hygiene situation is so bad that we have to watch out for serious health problems."

These refugees, in places of safety such as churches or on the city streets, are a small percentage of the thousands of Zimbabweans who have been entering the country, legally or illegally, for months.

'What I need, like everyone else, is asylum'

The actual number of Zimbabweans crossing into South Africa remains clouded by claim and counter-claim.

Cleo Mosana, the media liaison officer for the minister of home affairs, said that, daily, an average of 6 500 people of all nationalities entered the country via Beit Bridge and an average of half of that number departed.

On July 25, for example, 4 186 people entered South Africa from Zimbabwe and 2 627 left, Mosana said.

But these were legal crossings. During the first two weeks of July, soldiers and police allegedly arrested more than 5 000 illegal border-crossers. Maggie Soty, the national assembly safety and security committee chairperson, said that this number was only "the people we manage to catch".

Every week, more than 2 000 illegal Zimbabweans are being deported from a holding facility at Musina.

Jacky Mashapu, a home affairs spokesperson, said nearly 15 000 illegal Zimbabwean immigrants had been deported from the Lindela repatriation facility in the past two weeks.

Lieutenant-Colonel Mogorosi Baatweng of the Botswana Defence Force (BDF) confirmed that "the BDF is patrolling the border with Zimbabwe to prevent illegal immigrants and other illegal cross-border activities".

Vitalis Nyakudya arrived illegally in Johannesburg two weeks ago from Zimbabwe, via Botswana. The father of four children, left behind in Zimbabwe, Nyakudya, 40, displayed livid scars on his arms that he said had been inflicted by war veterans.

"What I need, like everyone else, is asylum," said Nyakudya.

"But it is so difficult, ask any of these people, and the delays are so bad. So I am likely to be deported. But the thing is that, even if I can earn R200 or R300, I will be taking back good money."

Nyakudya said his goal was to make as much money as possible because his youngest child, a girl, required an operation "to remove papilloma" from her nose, which would cost the equivalent of R3 500.

"That is why I don't mind being interviewed by the media," he said, "why I don't mind giving my name."

Verryn said that most of the refugees were unwilling to be photographed for fear of being identified by Zimbabwe's notorious Central Intelligence Organisation operatives.

"Don't underestimate the level of terror that is being carried out in Zimbabwe and don't underestimate its sophistication," he said.

"Lately I have seen and heard things that make the atrocities here of the 1970s and 1980s seem like small potatoes."

Addressing the refugees' meeting, Verryn said to everyone: "Remember you are not worthless and you are not to consider yourselves as such. You are in control of your own future and I am here to help you do that.

"If you do, for example, want your picture taken, or if you want to remain silent about yourself, that is your privilege in this building."

Peter X - he declined to give his surname - is a qualified teacher from a small town about 40km north of Harare, who crossed the Limpopo River on foot. He has been in Johannesburg for about six months, during which time he has lived at the church.

"Yes, I live here in a sleeping bag and do work for the church, for which I get paid. Anyway, I'm not a political refugee like some people. I am a straightforward economic refugee," he said.

"As a teacher, I was earning the equivalent of R100 a month in Zimbabwe. I couldn't manage to keep myself, my wife and our child on that. I ran away from the Zimbabwean economic meltdown - or is it evaporation by now? So I came to South Africa."

Asked what kind of assistance the church was receiving from the city fathers, the only comment that Verryn would make on the record was "not very much".

On Friday, Jack Redden, the spokesperson for the United Nations high commissioner for refugees in Pretoria, said reports that contingency plans - such as a special refugee camp for Zimbabweans in Musina - were being drawn up by the UN and the government were not accurate.

"We always have plans in place and it is our job to assist the local government with such matters. But no red lights have been flashing from the government in the last few weeks. As far as I know, it's business as usual," he said.

Mosana said that there was "no need" to set up refugee camps to cater for the influx of Zimbabweans. She said there was "an integrated government plan" in place to deal with an influx of refugees.

What the plan was, she would not say, but she said a number of steps were being considered by the department as part of its restructuring plan.

The department, she said, "is not a political football, like this thing (the Zimbabwean issue) is, and we are not going to be pressured into anything".