

Asylum-seekers still look for refuge in SA

ANDREW MUBAYIWA | 06 August, 2011 11:16

Close to 900000 Zimbabweans have applied for asylum in South Africa, official figures show, dashing any hopes that an exercise to issue work and study permits to the immigrants could help to ease the overload on the refugee-handling system.

Department of Home Affairs statistics also show a steady flow of new refugee-seekers from Zimbabwe, with an average of about 5000 a month received since December, when the department closed applications for work, business and study permits under its Zimbabwean documentation project, which is due for finalisation by month-end.

The department launched the project last year in a bid to regularise the stay of immigrants who had entered South Africa illegally, offering a temporary amnesty, during which migrants, many of whom had either initially sought refugee status or fraudulently obtained permits, were invited to apply for permits.

But the offer appears to have failed to entice Zimbabweans to drop claims for asylum, with only 275762 people - or about a third of the number that have sought refugee status - applying for permits.

The department said there were 849988 Zimbabwean nationals in the country with Section 22 permits, also known as asylum seeker temporary permits, which indicates the number of applications processed since 2008.

Applications received between January and July this year amounted to 34774, said the department.

The vast majority of asylum applications fall outside the Geneva Refugee Convention's definition of a refugee as someone forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence.

Many are ordinary job-hunters or economic migrants seeking refugee status because it is easier to obtain Section 22 permits than work permits. Holders of Section 22 permits are allowed to work while awaiting a hearing of their application.

Civil society groups said the department should have invested more resources in building trust among the immigrants.

"Some (immigrants) felt it was a trap to get them deported . maybe not enough was done to build trust within the migrant community," said Mpilo Shange-Buthane, the director of the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa.

The People against Suffering, Oppression and Poverty's Braam Hanekom said the department was viewed with suspicion among immigrants, because what the senior department officials say is often contrary to the actions of their junior staff on the ground.