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Refugees take SA gov't to court

by Own Correspondent

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A GROUP of Zimbabwean immigrants queuing at a South African ministry of home affairs office.

JOHANNESBURG – A group of asylum seekers have applied to the Pretoria High Court for an order directing the government to provide adequate refugee reception offices across South Africa.

In an application that if successful could see Pretoria forced to revamp a refugee management system that is in a state of near- total collapse, the foreign immigrants want the home affairs ministry to address a host of problems including rampant corruption and overcrowding at its refugee reception offices.

The applicants also want the court to declare the ministry's failure to set up enough reception offices "unlawful and unconstitutional".

The Lawyers for Human Rights last week filed the application on behalf of 74 asylum seekers, the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CORMSA) and the Coordinating Body of Refugee Communities (CBRC).

Home Affairs Minister Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma and her director general Mkuseli Apleni are first and second respondent. The director of asylum seeker management and the officers in charge at Marabastad refugee reception office and the Tshwane Interim Refugee Reception Office (TIRRO) are the other respondents in the matter that is yet to be set down for hearing.

The ministry last May closed the Crown Mines refugee reception office that served Johannesburg, which arguably houses the greatest number of foreign immigrants. The office was closed after nearby businesses filed a court application alleging crowds of immigrants that flocked to the office were disturbing their operations.

Following the closure asylum seekers from Johannesburg were asked to use the reception offices at Marabastad and TIRRO that were already barely able to cope with their own workloads before the addition of tens of thousands of more people that used to go to Crown Mines.

This, the applicants say, has led to overcrowding at the two reception offices that in many cases it has become virtually impossible for asylum seekers to get assistance due to them under the Refugees Act.

The applicants want the ministry forced to open a refugee facility in Johannesburg within 60 days of granting of the order.

They also want the ministry ordered to probe corruption at Marabastad and TIRRO, implement measures to maximise productivity at the two offices and ensure that force is not used unnecessarily against asylum applicants.

In addition the applicants say they want the ministry directed to introduce effective queue management systems at reception offices, put up signage stating procedures for applying for asylum, scrap fines for asylum seekers who failed to renew permits on or after June 2011 and set up grievance and complaints desks at Marabastad and TIRRO.

South Africa, which has Africa's most prosperous economy, is home to millions of foreign nationals, many of them living illegally and seeking better opportunities from failed economies like northern neighbour Zimbabwe.

There no exact figures of how many Zimbabweans live in South Africa but estimates put the figure at anything above two million or above a sixth of Zimbabwe's total population of 12 million people.

Locals often complain that the immigrants steal their jobs or lower working standards by readily accepting below market wages, while also overloading government social services and committing crime.

An outbreak of xenophobic violence in 2008 left at least 62 foreigners dead and thousands of others displaced, leaving foreign investors unsettled and South Africa's image as one of the more tolerant countries in the world shattered. -- ZimOnline