



Despite attacks, they still come

By Andrea Hart

While 30 000 migrants have left South Africa since the xenophobic attacks, 15 000 Zimbabweans are arriving in the country each month, according to official statistics.

On average 95 000 Zimbabweans enter South Africa compared to the 80 000 who are leaving.

Many of those coming in said they didn't know about the attacks against foreigners because they did not have television.

'There's still no food for these people to eat'

"The movement of people in and out of the country is as in previous months," said Border Control Operations Co-ordinating Committee co-ordinator Michael Malindi.

But the impact of violence against foreigners on informal figures in the Beitbridge-Musina area is uncertain.

In Harper, a township of Musina, a group of Zimbabwean men sleep in the bush and work for R10 a day. Some have been here for a few weeks, but most are new arrivals, hoping to earn enough for the passage to Johannesburg where they will look for better work.

Lesley Warren, who has a lodge 12km from the border, said the movement across the border hadn't slowed because of the xenophobic attacks.

"There's still no food for these people to eat and they still have to feed their families and get medical attention," he said.

But despite official figures suggesting otherwise, police at the border believe the number of people crossing into South Africa had declined.

"There is a decrease in the number of those entering through the border line and it has been there before the xenophobic attacks," said Senior Superintendent Lindela Mashigo.

This included all non-nationals, not only Zimbabweans.

But according to locals like Warren, xenophobic attacks and repatriation promises by the Zimbabwean government haven't changed the influx of illegal immigrants.

"Whatever promises (President Robert) Mugabe is making, they're not going to believe. Immigrants will continue to come until the politicians keep their promises."

Meanwhile, the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (Cormsa) has made an appeal to the departments of Home Affairs and Social Development, as well as the national police commissioner, concerning conditions in the Musina Detention Centre, run by the police.

It cited deportation without due process, inhumane conditions and unlawful detention of children with adults.

More than 190 000 people were detained in the centre between January 2006 and March 2008.

Cormsa and about 20 NGOs, including Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR), had decided to hold officials accountable for the human rights abuses against immigrants recorded at the centre, said Cormsa advocacy officer Duncan Breen.

Civil society members were hoping to prod departments into making changes themselves, he said.

Conditions at the centre were made public during a joint Aids Law Project and Treatment Action Campaign presentation in March.

At the forum, Home Affairs director of refugee affairs Busisiwe Mkhwebane-Tshehla said the department didn't know about the facility.

A day later, Director-General Mavuso Msimang released a statement confirming Home Affairs' association with the centre.

One month after his statement, LHR advocate David Cote wrote an article for Business Day charging that the centre violated "South Africa's international obligations and domestic immigration, policing and refugee laws".

"Conditions there are terrible, and far worse than at Lindela Repatriation Centre. At Lindela you get your own bed and food," said Cote.

At the centre, foreigners had to sleep on the concrete floor and share loaves of bread. Few got blankets.

The home affairs portfolio committee is to visit the centre early next week, according to committee clerk Eddy Mathonsi.

"We have asked members in the area to monitor the situation before our trip," said chairman Patrick Chauke.

But the recent xenophobic attacks put parliamentary and NGO investigations into abuses at the centre on hold.

DA deputy spokesperson for home affairs and social development Hilda Weber visited the centre last month. Weber said she was disgusted by conditions, which were "reminiscent of a jail."

If the committee's visit substantiated the reports of human rights abuses, Chauke said the portfolio committee would shut down the centre.

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