



Gauteng sticks to its guns on shelters

By Lee Rondganger

For the 2 500 refugees still seeking shelter at the temporary camps around Joburg, their last hope rested at the doors of the Constitutional Court.

But despite a last minute Constitutional Court appeal and a meeting between lawyers representing the refugees and government, the six temporary shelters will be torn down on Friday.

Gauteng government Spokesperson Thabo Masebe confirmed on Thursday night that the three shelters in Joburg and the three in Ekurhuleni will be closed down.

After losing a High Court appeal to stave off the camps' closure on Wednesday, the Wits Law Clinic and the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in SA (Cormsa) took their fight to the Constitutional Court.

They filed an urgent application seeking the court to grant an order forcing the government to introduce a comprehensive reintegration plan before they shut down the camps.

However, the Constitutional Court was in recess and the justices could not hear their application.

But representatives from the law clinic and Cormsa met with government officials at the Constitutional Court on Thursday to find a solution.

By 4pm, when the meeting ended, there was no firm undertaking from the government that the camps would not close down.

Jonathan Klaaren, a lawyer at the law clinic, said that despite there being no outcome from the meeting, he hoped that the government would act in good faith and not shut down the camps as the court was not able to hear their application.

But the Gauteng government believes that peace has returned to the areas affected by the May xenophobic violence and that it was safe for people to move back.

In confirming the government's decision to shut down the camps, Masebe did provide a glimmer of hope to the refugees.

"We understand that we are dealing with human beings and we will treat them with dignity and care. We have contingency plans for those who do not have accommodation and we will not see anybody sleeping on the side of the road," he said.

In the past week, refugees at the camps have been receiving a once-off payment from the government to find accommodation.

The payments vary from R650 for a single person to R1 500 for a mother and three children.

Gloria Mhango, who fled Zimbabwe with her three children in 2005, said the money was not enough.

"With this money (R1 500) they say I should go look for a place. But everywhere I go, the landlords want a deposit on the rooms, which is double the rent. I have been looking for days now and I still have not found a place to stay. When they shut down the camps, I will have nowhere to go."

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