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## Hundreds of Bay refugees battle for asylum permits

2009/04/02

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Image 1 of 2



HUNDREDS of refugees, including babies, are having to sleep on the street outside the home affairs refugee centre in Port Elizabeth for up to a week while seeking permits.

Refugees queue up overnight at the centre in Sidon Street, North End, and have to bribe security guards a minimum of R500 to be placed among the first 10 or 20 people in the queue.

Home affairs officials admit their security staff are being bribed and say they do not have adequate infrastructure to deal with the large number of

people.

Each day about 700 refugees from across Africa and elsewhere sleep on the pavement outside the office to get new permits, renew permits and reapply for lost permits.

"They start coming to the centre at about 6pm and by 3am this place is so packed that cars find it difficult to move on this road," a night-shift security guard at the centre said.

"There is no shelter or waiting room for them. They sleep in the street near the freeway," said another security guard.

The only facilities provided for them are four mobile toilets.

A team from The Herald which visited the site last week was told only 20 people were helped on Wednesday. On Thursday no one was helped at all after officials said the computer system was down.

Among the many refugees is Zimbabwean national Josefina Mupakami, who slept outside the centre for three days with her eight-month-old baby.

Mupakami, 36, together with five Zimbabweans who now live in Butterworth, Transkei, arrived in the city last Tuesday. They had to put cardboard on the pavement to make a place to sleep and washed in the sea nearby for three days.

"My child is now sick. Every time when I give him food he vomits. I think he has caught a cold because of the conditions here. It is difficult for him to breathe. I do not know what to do because I do not have enough money nor a chance to go to the doctor," she said.

Like the hundreds who are camped outside the home affairs office, Mupakami is determined to get her first asylum seeker's documents. In Butterworth, where she survives by selling vegetables and doing laundry, she has been warned by police that if they catch her again without a permit

she will be sent back to her home country.

Like many Zimbabweans who had fled the country, Mupakami cannot go back as there is a dire shortage of food in her village.

"I escaped Zimbabwe almost a year ago. I saw a delivery truck that was coming to South Africa and I hid in the back. I am here to seek a better life for me and my eight-month-old baby," she said.

"I cannot leave without the document. I'm willing to sleep here over the weekend if they do not help me tomorrow. I'm tired of being arrested by the police in Butterworth."

She said she could not afford the R500 bribe security guards often ask from refugees in order to keep a place for them in the queue.

Other refugees come from as far afield as Mafikeng, Cape Town and Johannesburg. Zimbabwean Chied-za Moyo came from Mafikeng because she was told it was easier to get asylum papers in Mandela Bay than other cities.

"But it seems as if things are the same. I've been here for the past two days and things are not as simple as I thought they would be. We can't even have a proper bath here. We wash ourselves in the nearby sea."


Refugee centre manager Siphon Lucas said the centre's infrastructure was not suitable to accommodate a large number of people. "We do try and accommodate vulnerable groups such as mothers with infants at the office's garage," he said.

Lucas said the office was aware of the bribery at the centre and the department was busy with an internal investigation. He also admitted that their computers were not working on Thursday.

Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA) advocacy officer Duncan Breen said refugees were given a raw deal and were not given free and fair access to the home affairs services.

Black Sash advocacy programme manager Nkosinkulu Nyembezi said most foreign nationals were being ill-treated by the government officials. "There is a need for policy changes and to speed up the time in which the government offers some of these documents," said Nyembezi.

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