



Illegal immigrants face deportation

By Lavern de Vries

In the wake of the death outside Home Affairs offices of Zimbabwe seeking refugee status, many people queueing for legal documents at Home Affairs offices in the province could be arrested and deported.

A joint R800 000 operation has been launched in the province by police and the Department of Home Affairs which will target:

- "Hotspots" of illegal immigrants.

'The strategy is to deal with illegal immigrants, not refugees'

- People who have already been denied refugee status.
- Marriages of convenience.
- Foreign nationals engaged in criminal activities.

The drive, named Operation Umbrella, was due to have kicked off at the beginning of this month, but has been delayed.

About 12 specially trained police officers, all highly skilled, were being diverted from their normal duties to head the unit, sources said.

'It is a project which requires two departments to work together for the challenges we face'

Home Affairs spokesperson Jackie Mashapu said: "The strategy is to deal with illegal immigrants, not refugees.

"Refugees are legal. They get the papers to confirm their status. We want to deal with illegal immigrants.

"When a person is arrested, that person will be questioned to determine his intentions (for being in SA). Each case will be dealt with on its merits."

But Mashapu was unable to explain how refugees who had yet to obtain papers would be dealt with.

"A person is a refugee when he or she had been awarded refugee status by obtaining the correct papers and a refugee is therefore legally in the country."

According to a source who declined to be named, R600 000 would be spent on deportation costs, while R200 000 was to be spent on administration, such as overtime pay and travel expenses for visits to outlying areas such as George and Paarl.

Community Safety MEC Leonard Ramatlakane would not comment on the cost, saying only that the project was "well-resourced for delivery".

"It is a project which requires two departments to work together for the challenges we face ... it is difficult to manage the challenge of crime with those who have no

status or those with some status, especially in the period we are heading into, which is one where crime peaks," Ramatlakane said.

Operation Umbrella was already functional, he said.

But sources close to the project claimed several problems had caused a delay.

These included an inability to find drivers for two trucks meant to transport illegal immigrants and the recent flooding of the Home Affairs offices in Barrack Street in the city centre.

Refugee advocacy group People Against Suffering, Suppression, Oppression and Poverty (Passop) has slammed the plan, saying that if the government intends deporting illegal immigrants, the group would mobilise the masses in protest action.

Passop's head, Braam Hanekom, said the information had come as a great shock.

He said he would meet Home Affairs portfolio committee chairperson Patrick Chauke to obtain his opinion on the planned operation.

The Consortium for Refugees and Migration in SA (Cormsa) also criticised the initiative, labelling it unfair.

"There is no efficient and effective service in place that allows for refugees to apply for status," said spokesperson Duncan Breen.

He said the organisation called for the suspension of the campaign "until the department allows for free and fair access for all applicants".

The consortium has requested that if the initiative goes ahead as planned, police will handle the arrests appropriately, as "people are being arrested for immigration irregularities and not crimes".

- This article was originally published on page 1 of [The Cape Argus](#) on November 15, 2007

CAPE ARGUS

Published on the Web by IOL on 2007-11-15 11:39:00

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