



## 'No need for court action on shelters'

There was no need for court action to force the Gauteng provincial government to keep open temporary safe sites for refugees and asylum seekers until they were reintegrated into communities, spokesperson Thabo Masebe said on Monday.

He was reacting to the announcement that the Wits Law Clinic and Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA) were bringing an urgent application in the Pretoria High Court.

They want the government ordered to communicate and implement a reintegration strategy which protects the rights of all, and to restore and not dismantle the Rifle Range temporary safe site until the reintegration strategy is in place.

"I don't know really what these people are looking for," said Masebe.

There was no need for them to take court action, he said. "All they had to do was come to us."

More than 62 people died, hundreds were injured and tens of thousands displaced in a wave of xenophobic attacks which started in Alexandra, Johannesburg on May 12 and spread to the rest of the country.

The displaced have been housed in temporary shelters set up throughout the province since then.

"All the shelters are still open, including the Rifle Range shelter," said Masebe.

However, he explained that when people left any of the shelters any excess tents were folded up.

Of about 1 700 refugees and asylum seekers at the Rifle Range camp at the height of the crisis, only 250 remained, he said.

The rest had left after refusing to accept temporary identity cards from the Department of Home Affairs or finding alternative accommodation in their communities.

Elsewhere in the province, there were still about 3 000 occupants of the safe shelters.

"It's going down because people are leaving every day," he said, adding that 10 families left the Rand Airport camp on Friday alone.

The government's key role had been to create conditions in all communities - starting with those where there was violence - for people to return to their homes, Masebe said.

"They should be safe to do so. They should not fear that somebody will attack them again," he said.

This had involved talking to the communities, which the provincial government had

started in May.

"It's not something that starts and stops. It starts and continues," he said. "I don't know what plan they are looking for."

Civil society organisations have come out in support of the court action.

While the need for legal action was regrettable, it was needed in the absence of the government's formal communication on a reintegration strategy, said the Reintegration Working Group.

The group includes representatives of, among others: the Anglican Diocese of Johannesburg; the Somali Community Board; the Refugee Ministries Centre; the Coalition Against Xenophobia; His People Church; the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation; Mthwakazi Arts and Culture; and the Salvation Army.

Masebe said the various groups could assist the government as political organisations and community organisations had done from the start.

"That process goes on."

In addition, the provincial government was talking to displaced people still at the shelters and who could not reintegrate on their own to find out what kind of help they needed.

This included assistance with the building of shacks destroyed in the violence - in Ekurhuleni, communities were already helping in rebuilding efforts - or finding alternative accommodation.

"There is no way as government, there is no way we are going to keep the shelters on a permanent basis."

The government did not want to create as permanent, separate settlements for foreign nationals, he said, adding that the government would oppose the court action.

"It is not properly informed." - Sapa

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