



Refugee shelter closures imminent

All displaced foreign nationals housed at three shelters in Johannesburg are expected to leave by the end of Tuesday, the Gauteng government said.

"They are being given financial assistance by United Nations agencies. As they get assistance, they leave the shelters," said provincial spokesperson Thabo Masebe.

"We hope all of them will leave. We'll make an assessment at the end of the day. But today [Tuesday], we are saying, all of them need to leave."

He said most refugees at camps in Glenanda, the Rand Airport and Boksburg were being given money to find alternative accommodation.

'We will have to close the camps in the next few days' "They need to move on with their own lives. They can't expect the government to shelter them on a permanent basis".
Some refugees did not qualify for financial assistance for various reasons and they were being "encouraged" to find their own accommodation, he added.

"We will have to close the camps in the next few days," said Masebe.

He said the disaster declaration that enabled the setting up of refugee camps expired on October 4.

"There will be no legal basis for the [government] to continue spending money beyond the fourth of October," said Masebe.

The Gauteng provincial government posted a notice on Monday to inform refugees that the process to close the camps down would begin on Tuesday.

"All persons who have applied for funding so that they are able to find their own alternative accommodation will be receiving this funding on Tuesday from 8am onwards, to enable the shelters to be closed as per Gauteng government decision," the notice reads.

It quotes from a Constitutional Court ruling which, among other things, said people who received financial assistance for rental accommodation may be asked to move out of the shelters.

The UN agencies have given refugees at other camps between R700 and R1 000 to find other accommodation.

But Duncan Breen of the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in SA said the government was practically forcing the refugees to move out.

If the government gave refugees money to find other accommodation, its actions would not be illegal, but Breen said the government was "creating a climate of fear".

"They've told people the sites would close... they're basically forcing people out," he told Sapa.

"At some sites, people have packed up in preparation of leaving... This would be illegal in terms of the Constitutional Court order."

East Rand police spokesperson Captain Owen Mlumbi said the government had informed the police of imminent camp closures, but everything was calm on Tuesday.

The closure of the refugee camps has been a subject of contention for weeks now.

The Constitutional Court recently ordered that the shelters stay open until at least September 30 to give the government and legal representatives of the refugees time to discuss options for those who said they had nowhere else to go.

The Constitutional Court is scheduled to hear arguments on the matter on November 20.

Xenophobic attacks swept through the country in May, killing more 60 people and displacing some 15 000.

The courts are dealing with more than 420 cases related to the violence.

In July, more than 200 men taken from the Glenanda shelter to the Lindela repatriation centre and later released, were arrested on a traffic violation when they camped on the side of the road. They said they had nowhere else to go. - Sapa

Published on the Web by IOL on 2008-09-30 15:37:52

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