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South Africa: Safety camps have to go

JOHANNESBURG, 30 September 2008 (IRIN) - Temporary shelters set up for foreigners displaced by xenophobic violence earlier in 2008 have to close, said a South African provincial government spokesman.

"These shelters are temporary and were set up as a disaster response [during the attacks]. The shelters cannot be treated as permanent homes - the conditions are not, as such. The shelter residents are free to go and live within the communities," said Thabo Masebe, a spokesman for the government of Gauteng, South Africa's richest province, where the wave of violence began in May 2008.

He refuted claims that the government was attempting to force a closure of the shelters on 30 September in defiance of a Constitutional Court ruling. "We are not closing the shelters down today [30 September]; in terms of the court ruling we have until 4 October," said Masebe.

The Consortium for Migrants and Refugees (CoRMSA), which managed to get a reprieve from the Constitutional Court to keep the shelters open to at least 30 September, said the government had issued notices to residents on 29 September saying the camps would close on 30 September.

Constitutional Court Chief Justice Pius Langa was reported by the local media as saying in the most recent ruling, in September, that all parties could continue to work towards closure of the shelters under certain conditions until the court heard arguments for and against the camps on 20 November.

More than 60 people were killed, hundreds were injured, and nearly 20,000 migrants from neighbouring countries were displaced in attacks that spread throughout the country.

The shelters have become the focus of an ongoing court battle since the provincial government announced in late July that the shelters would close by 15 August, prompting a number of civil society groups to take legal action.

According to the court ruling, illegal immigrants should be removed from the shelters and deported; legal residents should be reintegrated into communities, and people who received money for rental accommodation should be asked to leave the camps.

An estimated 6,000 migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, were housed in the shelters. "There are only about 2,000 people left in the shelters - we expect many to leave in the next few days," said Masebe.

He added that around 700 of those left in the shelters were receiving financial assistance for rental accommodation from the UN refugee agency, UNHCR.

Some residents are reluctant to leave the camps for fear of persecution.

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