



PRESS RELEASE

Forced closure of “Refugee Reception Office” further endangers health of vulnerable Zimbabweans in South Africa

Johannesburg - 4 March 2009 - Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF), the international medical humanitarian organisation, today denounced the decision by South African authorities to close the ‘showground’, a large open field in Musina town near the Zimbabwe border, where 3,000 - 4,000 Zimbabweans queue to apply for asylum and seek refuge each night. The closure of the showgrounds demonstrates a flagrant disregard for the humanitarian and protection needs of Zimbabweans seeking refuge in South Africa and will have extremely negative consequences, as no allowances have been made to ensure their access to shelter, food or medical assistance.

Every day, Zimbabweans cross the Limpopo River into South Africa, risking their lives to flee political instability, economic meltdown, food insecurity, and health system collapse in their country. Since July 2008, tens of thousands of Zimbabweans have applied for asylum at the South African Department of Home Affairs (DHA) “Refugee Reception Office” at the showground, but only a fraction have been granted asylum and there have been regular bottlenecks, creating a large concentration of people living in inhumane conditions. Each month, MSF provides approximately 2,000 medical consultations for Zimbabweans at its mobile clinic at the showground.

Despite the ongoing flow of Zimbabweans to the showground, on Monday, 2 March, the DHA announced that it would close its office by Friday, 6 March. The Department then ordered everyone to leave the area. Although the showground does not meet minimum standards for humanitarian assistance it is the only place in Musina where undocumented Zimbabweans, awaiting their papers, are safe from arrest or deportation.

This sudden, forced closure of the showground comes just two weeks after MSF released a report on the ongoing humanitarian and medical crisis in Zimbabwe and called on South African authorities to halt deportations and provide adequate humanitarian assistance for Zimbabweans fleeing across the border.

“This ill-conceived decision by South African authorities will place Zimbabweans seeking refuge in South Africa at incredible risk – especially considering that many have serious illnesses, including HIV and tuberculosis, which cannot be properly attended to by the collapsed Zimbabwe health system,” said Rachel Cohen, MSF’s Head of Mission in South Africa.

“Patients at our mobile clinic at the showground informed us that many people fled Musina yesterday morning, fearing they would be arrested or deported if they stayed,” Cohen continued. *“Our medical teams know from experience that the threat of deportation serves only to force Zimbabweans into hiding, as they are too afraid to come forward to receive the assistance they so desperately need.”*

On Tuesday morning, 3 March, South African authorities started dividing Zimbabweans seeking refuge at the showground into different groups, according to their legal status, gender, and age. Women with

children, pregnant women and unaccompanied minors were removed from a special location that had been established for them at the showground.

"People without asylum-seeking papers were separated into groups, their names were recorded, and families were split up in this process. Today, the DHA ordered all temporary shelters to be taken down and burnt before they would begin processing applications for approximately 1,700 people. Tonight no-one will have anywhere to sleep" said Sara Hjalmarsson, MSF Field Coordinator in Musina. "In addition to this, there is no information on how newly arrived Zimbabweans will be able to apply for asylum. These already vulnerable people are even more traumatised by the uncertainty they now face."

Those who had already received asylum-seeking papers, but were remaining in the showground because they had nowhere else to go, were told to "move on." It is likely that many of them will travel to the Central Methodist Church, in Johannesburg, where there are now 5,000 Zimbabweans seeking shelter and protection, and where MSF provides medical care for more than 2,000 Zimbabweans each month.

"We are shocked with this sudden decision, particularly as we have been a part of numerous discussions with South African authorities, UN agencies, and NGOs in Musina to find an acceptable solution for the large numbers of Zimbabweans in Musina" said Rachel Cohen. "Once again, MSF calls upon the government of South Africa to stop deportations and provide immediate, adequate humanitarian assistance – including some form of legal status – for Zimbabweans seeking refuge in the country."

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Note to editor:

- ✓ The events in Musina began just one day after the police evicted 400 displaced refugees of different nationalities from the Akasia (Klerksoord) shelter outside Pretoria, a makeshift camp established after attacks of xenophobic violence displaced tens of thousands of foreign nationals in Gauteng Province in May 2008. Police moved in on the camp in the morning of the 3 March. During the police operation, shacks set up by the camp residents were burned. The residents were taken to various locations, including Lindela, where the majority of people have been forced to sleep outside with no shelter or food. MSF provided emergency medical care to the residents of Akasia following their eviction and continues to provide mobile medical and psychological care in the areas to which they have been relocated.
- ✓ MSF has been working with Zimbabweans seeking refuge in South Africa in both Musina and Central Johannesburg since 2007. In mid-2008, MSF also responded to the needs of displaced foreign nationals following the xenophobic violence, and in late-2008 provided medical care, water and sanitation interventions, and hygiene promotion to respond to the cross-border cholera outbreak in Musina and Johannesburg.

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