

## US Church Leaders Say Zimbabwean Refugees in South Africa Need More Aid

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MAKHADO, South Africa (CNS) -- Churches, the South African government and other agencies need to step up their help to Zimbabweans crossing the border into South Africa as the numbers increase, said members of a U.S. Catholic delegation.

Without church and other groups helping Zimbabwean refugees in South Africa's Limpopo province, "many people wouldn't survive" after crossing the border from Zimbabwe, said Kevin Appleby, director of migration and refugee policy for the U.S. bishops in Washington. He told Catholic News Service "the most vulnerable are women, victims of violence and unaccompanied minors."

Appleby, Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City and Anastasia Brown, director of refugee programs for the U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services, visited Limpopo Aug. 31-Sept. 2 as part of a larger U.S. Catholic delegation's Aug. 28-Sept. 6 visit to South Africa.

For some Zimbabweans, resettlement in another country is their "only hope," Appleby said, noting that they "are targets at home and in South Africa" with its high level of xenophobia.

Brown said many Zimbabwean women "told me of their persecution." Some were victims of "sexual violence for political purposes, one had seen her husband beaten to death and another had seen two people shot" in Zimbabwe, she said, noting that "political violence is continuing in Zimbabwe" despite the formation of a coalition government there in February.

Thandi Hadebe, project director with Jesuit Relief Service in Makhado, about 120 miles from the Zimbabwean border, said agency workers see "fewer people coming with stories of beatings" than in 2008, but added she has heard stories of intimidation and violence from Zimbabweans who fled recently.

Hadebe said JRS staffers counsel victims of torture and people who have been traumatized.

"A lot of people come (to South Africa) with high hopes," she said, "but they can't find a place to live and find that the grass is not so green on the other side of the fence."

The trafficking of girls is a problem, Hadebe said, noting that "some parents pay people to bring their daughters to join them in South Africa and they never see them again."

Young Zimbabwean girls in Limpopo's towns "need an intervention so that they don't end up in prostitution," Brown said, noting that she "heard stories of trafficking of girls for sexual and labor purposes."

Brown said South Africa needs a "robust education campaign" so its citizens "understand the vulnerabilities of Zimbabweans coming into their country, even in the face of their own difficulties" of high unemployment and poverty.

The Zimbabweans the U.S. group saw coming through the official border post at Beitbridge Sept. 1 were "not in the same condition as those we saw in the shelters" run by churches in Musina and Makhado, Brown said. Refugees in shelters had climbed through a barbed-wire fence and walked miles to get to South Africa, Brown said, noting that those crossing officially were "dressed fairly well and looked healthier."

The children in the shelters are "particularly vulnerable" and need a "much larger-scale response" from South African authorities as well as the international community, Brown said.

Bishop Wester said he was "impressed with the work" he saw being done by the churches, nongovernmental organizations and the South African government.

The group saw three South African soldiers patrolling the three-layer barbed-wire fence that marks the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

"I could tell that the soldier I spoke to was genuinely troubled by what he saw, the evidence of women being raped and beaten up" as they made their way across the Limpopo

River and through the African bush, Bishop Wester said. The soldier "kept shaking his head and touching his heart," he said.

The river bed was dry when the delegation saw it Sept. 1. At its fullest, there are still places where people can cross the river on foot, but there are dangers of being eaten by crocodiles or washed away, Tobias Hlambelo, a Zimbabwean who works for the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in Musina, told the delegation Sept. 1.

Hlambelo said the gangs at the border that rape and steal from Zimbabweans are fellow Zimbabweans "preying on our own people."

Speaking the local language, the thieves "lure those trying to flee and take their money," said Hlambelo, who was an opposition activist in Zimbabwe when he fled in 2004 after being captured and tortured by President Robert Mugabe's forces.

Bishop Wester said South Africa seems to have "positioned itself as a welcoming country" for Zimbabwean refugees, noting that he has "seen other governments that are not as open."

The police-run detention center in Musina that the delegation visited Sept. 1 takes Zimbabweans who have crossed the border without documentation to the local South African Home Affairs office to fill out asylum papers, then releases them.

"This gives them a chance to establish themselves as asylum seekers," Bishop Wester said.

He said the Zimbabweans he spoke to during the Limpopo visit "seem very patient, very long-suffering. There is a graciousness about them."

Bishop Wester said that, at a night shelter for boys in Musina, a 13-year-old who "had faced great dangers in crossing the border" told him he "wants to work to support his family back home."

A Zimbabwean mother told him "she had left her children with her parents and came alone" to try to earn money to send back to them, Bishop Wester said.

"They make great sacrifices for their families," he said.

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