

Zimbabwean Refugees in South Africa Desperate to Send Money Home

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MAKHADO, South Africa (CNS) -- Men who had gathered for a distribution of soup on the side of a road in Makhado told a U.S. Catholic bishops' delegation they were desperate for work.

A 23-year-old man who identified himself only as Hilary told Catholic News Service he has been in Makhado for 15 months and sometimes finds work for a day, but earns very little.

"I want to get down to the city for work so I can send money to my family still in Zimbabwe," he said Aug. 31.

Hilary, who comes from a rural village in Zimbabwe, said he left school after 10th grade because his parents could no longer afford the fees. He said he has "no hope" that the situation back home will improve enough for him to go back and earn a living.

Father Frank Gallagher, a Missionary of the Sacred Heart and pastor of Queen of Peace Parish in Makhado, distributes soup and bread to Zimbabweans who sleep on a field at the side of the town's main road that leads to Johannesburg, 400 miles to the southwest.

With a 40-percent unemployment rate in Limpopo province there is little chance of work for those entering the country, Father Gallagher said.

At Catholic Relief Services' Johannesburg office Aug. 30, Jesuit Father Gary Smith told the U.S. delegation that, if Zimbabweans visit the Jesuit Refugee Service office in Makhado with contact details of a family member in a South African city, JRS will buy them a bus ticket to get there.

Hilary's frustration with the lack of work in Zimbabwe was echoed by women at a night shelter in Musina, about 10 miles from Beitbridge, the official border post between Zimbabwe and South Africa.

A 22-year-old woman who "jumped the border" with her 7-week-old son two weeks earlier told CNS it is "very difficult to get food" in Zimbabwe, and she wants to stay in South Africa.

Other women -- who were making a meal with beans, tomatoes and onions in the shelter's makeshift kitchen -- said they have no hope of a future for themselves and their families in Zimbabwe.

The shelter, run by Musina Catholic officials working with other organizations, takes in women and their young children for three nights, but supervisor Asnath Msema said she "can't chase them away" after such a short stay if they are sick or beg to stay.

In Makhado, Queen of Peace Parish not only runs a soup project but also offers a home for a maximum of 14 Zimbabwean boys whom police have "rounded up on the streets," Father Gallagher said. The church works with social services, and police to try to trace their families or place them in foster care, he said.

When the U.S. delegation visited the home Aug. 31, the youngest boy was 10 years old.

Some boys "say they know their family is in South Africa but they don't know where," Father Gallagher said.

To help them integrate into the community "and form bonds with other children," Father Gallagher has formed two soccer teams that include refugees and local boys, who compete against other teams.

Brighton Tararera, 15, told CNS he came to Makhado from Masvingo, Zimbabwe, in 2008 after his parents died.

He said would like to be a policeman when he grows up "because it's a good job."

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