

Africa

The long wait for help

Thembelihle Tshabalala goes to Musina and listens to Zimbabwean refugees suffering as they wait for asylum

Arriving at the showgrounds in Musina, Limpopo, near the Zimbabwean border, we were greeted by the sight of desperate men, women and children sleeping on nothing but cardboard. About 500 people, mostly Zimbabweans, have made this place a temporary home until they get asylum papers.

Each day about 50 new people come into the showgrounds hoping for the kind of life they no longer believe they will get from their cholera-stricken, inflation-hit country. The showgrounds are not a sustainable place for humans to live. The open field surrounded by barbed wire has no proper shelter, not even a tent.

"They're left to sleep in the dirt. Even our dogs sleep in the house," said Paul Malan, who has lived in Musina for 22 years. Men sit in the sun and tell jokes all day to forget about their misery and the only movement anyone makes is at the sight of food.

"We try to take food to the showgrounds but it is sometimes only enough to feed the women and the children," said Reverend Paul Richardson of the Musina Baptist church.

I was standing in the scorching Musina sun for 45 minutes talking to a group of about 12 men when I realised that the main topic of discussion was the number of days each one had gone without food. Heartbroken by their tales, I decided to buy my newfound friends two loaves of bread from the capitalist vendors who have set up tables of all kinds of goods to sell to the refugees.

"I have been here for three weeks now. I came here because I heard that we get refugee status in South Africa when we come here. The last time I ate was three days ago. I survive only on water," said Tafaira Mabruku, a carpenter from Bulawayo, who left his family in Zimbabwe in the hope of



Zimbabwean refugees, including small children, sleep in the dirt in the Musina showgrounds as they wait for political asylum. Photographs: Oupa Nkosi

starting a new life in South Africa.

It broke my heart even further when I realised that the two loaves of bread I bought would not be enough. People started following any group that featured a stranger who looks potentially helpful. By the time we got to the bread vendor there were 25 more men added to the crew I had interviewed. Pushing and shoving seemed to be the only way to get fed at that time.

Although neighbouring churches and welfare projects give food to the refugees at the showgrounds, men struggle to get fed.

The Musina community believes that petty crime has increased in recent months. Malan told me that his house has been broken into three



times since October. "There have been three break-ins into my house since then and nothing heavy was taken, so I believe that it is the Zimbabweans who are hungry and want something to eat," he said.

Malan said that the second break-in occurred while he was in the house. "When I walked towards the room that the guy was in, he just ran away and came back after a few minutes to take some money. I am sure he meant no harm, he was just desperate."

Some of the refugees agree that their desperation might lead them to commit crimes. "If we have no asylum papers we cannot go out and look for jobs. What other way is there to make money for food? I am not saying it's right to break into other people's

homes but we need help. We are dying here," said Wisdom Mangadza.

The wait for asylum papers tends to be longer than the refugees expect and they need shelter and blankets to make the wait easier. "I am not going anywhere until I get these papers. Besides, if I go anywhere close to the town I will be arrested. I think I have suffered enough as it is," said one of the men.

There are a number of women with crying babies on their backs. Mothers put water in their bottles instead of milk. "My baby has been crying all morning and I don't know what to do because my husband got asylum and left for Johannesburg last week," said a 30-year-old woman who didn't want to be named.

How to donate

As the situation in Zimbabwe worsens an increasing number of people on both sides of the South African border need basic necessities. On Wednesday President Kgalema Motlanthe announced that Zimbabwe's neighbours will launch an urgent humanitarian campaign in the hope of saving the country from economic collapse and a cholera epidemic.

Governments around the world are not the only ones that can lend a helping hand to our neighbours in despair — we, as ordinary citizens, can make a difference. Through the Change4ever campaign we will not only help Zimbabwe and its people in this agonising time, but will contribute to sustainable anti-poverty measures in Southern Africa.

The *Mail & Guardian*, with the Southern Africa Trust, is part of the Change4ever campaign. We challenge you, the reader, to help us.

There are four different ways you can assist:

- To donate R5 to the Change4ever campaign SMS the word "change" to 36545;
- Log on to www.change4ever.org to donate online;
- Make a donation directly to the Change4ever campaign account;
- The *M&G* is collecting non-perishable foodstuffs, clothes and blankets at its Rosebank office from January 5. For details call the *M&G* offices on 011 250 7300.

Catholic Welfare & Development also launched a campaign to fight cholera in Zimbabwe. Jik for Zim is collecting money to buy bleach to purify water in Zimbabwe. One capful of Jik will purify 25 litres of drinking water if left overnight. For donations to the Jik for Zim campaign call Catholic Welfare & Development on 021 425 2095. A donation of R50 will purify 24 000 glasses of water. A donation of R500 will purify 240 000 glasses of water.

Anyone who wishes to donate items or money to refugees in Musina can call Reverend Paul Richardson, who works in the town, on 015 534 0479 or 082 446 1728.
— Thembelihle Tshabalala

Account details

To donate to the Change4ever campaign:

Name: Southern Africa Trust
Bank: Standard Bank
Type: Current
Branch: Midrand / 001155
Account: 411 39 11 00
Reference: Cholera appeal

To donate to the Jik for Zim campaign:

Name: CWD Zim Crisis Relief
Bank: Standard Bank
Type: Current
Branch: Thibault Square, Cape Town / 020909
Account: 07 115 5090



If you could change one thing forever, what would it be?

"I would want African government structures to be strong and for democracies to function effectively in Africa. Lawlessness and corruption should be shunned."

Kate Rooseboom, individual supporter

SMS "CHANGE" and your answer to 36545 or answer online

Kate donates through change4ever every month. "I believe money should be channelled into initiatives that are led by people with a vision," she says. Text your answer to the change4ever question or answer online. With each SMS you donate R5 to change4ever. This not only gives you the opportunity to have your say about what you would like to change forever, but at the same time take action to create the change you want to see. Your contribution will support the many groups working for lasting solutions to poverty in southern Africa.

www.change4ever.org

