

Musina's show grounds

At a bare-bones refugee holding area near the Zim border, asylum-seekers face hunger, dirt and uncertain waiting
Linn Davis and Thembelihle Tshabalala

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The show grounds in Musina, Limpopo Province, are no-man's-land. Yet they are filled with people.

Their open dirt fields bake in the blistering midday sun, as perhaps 500 asylum-seekers are caught in the uncertain politics of an international crisis.

The refugees, most of whom come from Zimbabwe, cannot walk more than 50-100 meters (165-330 feet) from the grounds without risking police capture and deportation, they say, but they are permitted to stay at the grounds without papers indefinitely. Some refugees are given temporary asylum documents within a week, but most stay for two weeks, three weeks or longer.

Indeed, some asylum-seekers claim that Home Affairs officials are deliberately dragging their feet, in order to leave asylum-seekers in limbo at the show grounds and ultimately prevent them from entering South Africa. Some also allege that officials are accepting bribes of R150 (US\$15) to process asylum applications more quickly.

The Department of Home Affairs did not respond to the *Mail & Guardian's* requests for comment on these claims.

As immigrants flood through the bush and across the Limpopo River from Zimbabwe – where hunger and cholera now mushroom like inflation – the 20,000-person border town of Musina is straining to cope with the influx. Shops and streets are clogged with people, and some residents suggest that hunger and desperation among refugees has led to an increase in robberies.

Cholera patients from Zimbabwe have overwhelmed Musina-area health facilities, causing government health officials to declare Limpopo Province a “disaster area” last week. This will free up additional health care funds.

International NGOs and local churches, meanwhile, are supplying basic health care and food rations at the show grounds, where refugees wait up to three weeks to be seen by a mobile Home Affairs unit.

Clean water is available from several taps at the site, and the Musina Town Council has donated a dozen portable toilets, which are cleaned regularly.

Still, undocumented refugees at the grounds sleep on cardboard in the dust, with little food or shelter. At the camp's Médecin Sans Frontières clinic, patients complained of intestinal illnesses, heat exhaustion and hunger-induced dizziness.

One man said he had not eaten in four days.

“We are street kids in this complex”, he said. “We're not refugees”.

Albert Masango, a boiler operator from Harare who was waiting for his asylum application to be considered, said he had stayed at the camp for two weeks. Like most, he left Zimbabwe for a combination of reasons, chiefly political violence and economic hardship. He had hoped to send remittances to his struggling family back home, but he has found himself stuck in Musina waiting for asylum documents instead.

“I have two kids in Harare, and now here I am sleeping on the ground”, he said.

Almost all refugees at the show grounds crossed into South Africa illegally, paying guides around R200 (US\$20) to be led through a gauntlet of electric fencing and armed SA and Zim soldiers along the Limpopo.

Criminals from both countries, refugees said, often exploit immigrants travelling through the bush, extracting money for bogus travel services and work promises, stealing everything but underwear and raping female refugees.

In addition to famine, unemployment and cholera back home, many Zimbabweans said they sought asylum because they are members of Morgan Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). They fear political retaliation if they are forced to return.

Travelling to South Africa by legal means is not feasible, they said, because getting a passport or other travel document back home would cost as much as US\$200 (R2000) in foreign-currency bribes – if it were possible at all. One refugee said he had tried to secure a travel document, but hyperinflation left him unable to change his Zimbabwean dollars into enough US dollars.

Another said the official he had bribed told him there simply wasn't paper or ink available to approve a document for him.

For immigrants from other African countries, the journey is often more arduous still. One Ethiopian refugee, named Debebe, said he had travelled for five months, half by bus and half on foot, to escape violence and drought at home.

Each day at 5am, Masango, Debebe and others begin to queue behind a gate at one side of the fenced show grounds compound, where they will wait for a mobile Home Affairs unit to arrive at least four hours later.

When the unit does arrive, refugees said, it may or may not actually see any asylum-seekers. One man said he had been in the show grounds for two weeks but had yet to even fill out an application for asylum. Other refugees wait equally long for a reply.

On the day of the *M&G*'s visit, officials said one of the unit's trucks was out of service, so no asylum applications could be reviewed. When Home Affairs stops work for the summer holidays at the end of this week, refugees fear they will be stranded in the show grounds until January.

While many wait to be seen by Home Affairs officials, several refugees estimated that around a quarter of those living at the show grounds have already received valid asylum papers but have no means to travel onward. One young man said he had arranged to stay with a friend in Johannesburg, but without money to travel he still sleeps at the show grounds and relies on meagre food donations from a local church to survive.

Others at the show grounds, ironically, have come from Johannesburg to renew their asylum permits. They had heard that renewals in Musina were processed quickly, one refugee said, only to discover that the opposite was true.

The overcrowding and poor conditions at the show grounds understandably cause tension on all sides. And news and rumour travel fast.

Some refugees claimed a Home Affairs guard had beaten a refugee the previous day, and others reported prostitution and robbery among refugees. Camp residents stoned a suspected thief to death last Wednesday, said a bystander, although this could not be independently verified.

At night at the show grounds, hundreds of people crowd together near fences and trees, lying on cardboard boxes and tattered fabric. But others stay awake.

In the centre of a dirt field, a large group of young men surround several performers of a traditional drama.

"They're trying to entertain people", one man explains, "so we don't think too much".