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TAC Condemns Police Raid on the Central Methodist Church

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Plea for donations to church so that it can continue to support the people seeking refuge there

31 January 2008, 11:15pm (GMT+2)

People in Zimbabwe face food and medicine shortages, torture, the loss of their democratic rights and the breakdown of society and the rule of law. Many have sought protection and survival in South Africa and other countries. One such place where about 1,500 Zimbabwean and refugees from other African countries as well as some poor South Africans seek shelter and have a degree of social support and dignity is the Central Methodist Church in central Johannesburg, run by Bishop Paul Verryn. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) provides health-care support to people staying at the church. Many people living there have HIV and/or TB.

Around midnight on Wednesday 30 January, elements of the South African Police Services (SAPS) from Johannesburg Central Police Station carried out an unconstitutional raid on the church.

According to Robert Chirikure, a refugee living at the church, the police started to arrest some of the refugees who were sleeping outside on the grounds that they were an obstruction to traffic on a public street. The police proceeded to chase the refugees into the church where they beat up the defenceless occupants that included pregnant women and children. Police also used pepper spray, despite the fact that no one resisted arrest. No search warrant was produced by the police before or during the raid.

The police, who were accompanied by the Department of Home Affairs' Immigration Unit, then checked the immigration status of the refugees. Those deemed to be without valid documentation or with expired visitors? visas were taken overnight to Johannesburg Central Police Station with threats of deportation. The police mostly targeted men whom they shouted abuse at and labelled as criminals. The Church is now apparently almost empty as close to 1,000 men were removed from the premises.

The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) condemns this vindictive, xenophobic, unnecessary and illegal raid. It is not clear what purpose or crime reduction measure was served by it. TAC calls upon the Johannesburg Central Police Station Commander to provide a full explanation of why the raid was carried out and whether the Department of Home Affairs authorised or called for the raid. We also demand the immediate release of those detained and call upon the Department of Home Affairs to expeditiously deal fairly and humanely with refugees who are seeking to regularise their stay in South Africa. The Mugabe dictatorship has created a crisis in Zimbabwe that has led to people fleeing from hunger, political repression, and the collapse of health care. This crisis is in part due to the failure of South Africa's policy of ?silent diplomacy?. In this context, South Africa has a special duty to accommodate Zimbabwean migrants and relieve their plight.

We demand that the United Nations High Commission on Refugees and the South African Human Rights Commission intervene to stop police harassment of the people staying at the church. We also call on the Independent Complaints Directorate and the MEC for Safety and Security in Gauteng to investigate the police actions. We call on South African

civil society to mobilise for the rights of refugees and for a return to democracy in Zimbabwe.

TAC makes a special plea to our electronic newsletter readers to please make donations to the Central Methodist Church so that it can continue to provide support to the people seeking refuge there. The account details are as follows:

First National Bank, Pritchard Street Branch
Branch code: 251105
Account number: 50450644817

For more information please contact Regis Mtutu, TAC's international solidarity coordinator, on 084 310 8614.

- Immigrants and Refugees

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