

Crisis at Soetwater Camp escalates: hunger strikes and attempted suicides

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- **Camp must be closed immediately and the City and Province must open facilities in communities, especially the city centre and suburbs, to shelter people. Reintegration efforts are a priority.**
- **President must give the United Nations a mandate to assist refugees who wish to repatriate to their own country or a third one.**

A tragedy is unfolding as people who fled xenophobic terror now face the uncaring machinery of the state. Most camps and shelters in which displaced people are staying fall below international humanitarian standards.

We have received unconfirmed reports of people going on hunger strike as well as four attempted suicides at Soetwater Refugee Camp today. There is enormous dissatisfaction at the camp. The conditions are awful: it is cold and insufficiently sheltered. It is not on a public transport route to Cape Town, so displaced people are essentially stuck in the camps without adequate information about the outside world, unable to work or attend school. There are not enough toilets, so the sanitary state of the camp is horrendous. Refugees are receiving two meals a day, but the organisation of food distribution and the quality of the food is unacceptable, with many of the camp's approximately 3000-4000 people only eating cold food. The camp was one of several set up by Mayor Helen Zille to relocate people displaced by xenophobic violence two weeks ago. Both the province and civil society have condemned these camps.

On 4 June 2008, we sent a [letter of demand](#) to President Mbeki, Premier Rasool and Mayor Zille asking for a plan to deal with the conditions at Soetwater, to bring the UN in to advise and assist on all aspects of this crisis and to open up alternate shelters like community halls. We received a positive response from the premier, no response from the President and a [deeply regrettable response abdicating all responsibility from the mayor](#).

Yesterday, displaced refugees had several meetings with a representative of the United Nations at the TAC and AIDS Law Project offices in Cape Town. One of these meetings broke down. Unconfirmed reports indicate that the latest crisis is a consequence of this.

We therefore call on all three tiers of government, local, provincial and national, to do the following:

- Soetwater Camp and other refugee camps must be closed. The people of Soetwater must be relocated to secured facilities in the city centre and suburbs, on transport routes, close to Cape Town's Central Business District and where there is much greater chance of reintegration.
- The President must give the United Nations a mandate to assist displaced people who wish to repatriate to

their own country or a third one.

- The UN at its most senior level must immediately take responsibility for properly communicating with all displaced people about the options available to them.

We do not want to pursue litigation in the middle of a humanitarian crisis but if we have no other option we will have to seek legal relief.

The continued existence of the camps and failure of the UN to be present on a large scale undermines the rule of law in South Africa and internationally. The tragedy in the camps and xenophobic terror in South Africa represents a crisis of conscience for our people and the peoples of our continent.

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