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Report on panel discussion on violence, xenophobia and camps in Gauteng and Western Cape

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A panel discussion was held on Tuesday 24 June at the AIDS Law Project offices in Cape Town. The subject of the discussion was ?Taking Stock: Violence, xenophobia and camps: Where to from here??

Panellists included Sharon Ekambaram, General Director of Médecins Sans Frontières South Africa based in Johannesburg, Mohammad Hirsi, refugee representative, Zackie Achmat of the TAC and Fatima Hassan, senior attorney with the AIDS Law Project.

Discussed:

Following the recent xenophobic attacks in Johannesburg, 7000 individuals remain displaced in camps and safety sites. Initially there were 30 000 displaced, and a further 35 000 returned to Mozambique, 2000 to Malawi

The condition in the Gauteng sites is poor. Relief work remains uncoordinated, and healthcare, sanitation and shelter issues seem to be increasing. As the violence and murder was more extreme in Johannesburg and surrounds during the attacks, those at the safety sites are reluctant to be reintegrated into the communities from which they came, and there is still reluctance amongst many communities to accept back foreign nationals.

The camps are not a sustainable situation.

In Cape Town, the camps and other sites are also experiencing problems involving sanitation and threats to security. Even though humanitarian relief has been better coordinated by Civil Society, the longevity of the crisis has caused burnout amongst volunteers.

In both situations, organisations whose roles are normally focused on other issues have been required to provide humanitarian relief for thousands of people over a prolonged period. The inadequate response of Provincial Government, having distanced itself from the crisis, has put pressure on both those in the camps and those providing relief.

The failure of the UNHCR to act decisively has caused distress amongst the displaced people. Dithering over resettlement, repatriation and reintegration has created a lack of faith in the UNHCR, and uncertainty regarding the future. Their undated ?Message to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in South Africa? received on the 24th of June displays their lack of will to intervene.

Additional to the xenophobia crisis in South Africa, the stalemate following elections in Zimbabwe is threatening to undermine stability within Zimbabwe and neighbouring countries. Reports of organised violence and intimidation are widespread, and the impact of this will reach South Africa. As the destination of choice for refugees from human rights violations, many are once again crossing the borders. As most are entering South Africa without legal status as refugees, they are being given no protection by the South African government.

These crises combined require immediate attention from the UNHCR and the South African Government, especially

the Department of Home Affairs, and, at a local level, improved and consistent humanitarian relief for displaced people.

Civil Society is thus in agreement that these situations can achieve no resolution without a concerted and strategic effort from all concerned, particularly those displaced and suffering whose future seems uncertain.

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