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Joint Press Statement from Civil Society: Update on Displaced Persons Crisis in Cape Town

Thursday, 10 July 2008

Since the 23rd of May, there have been thousands of displaced people living in camps and ?safety? sites around Cape Town. According to the Provincial Government as reported in the Cape Times on Friday 04 July, there are still more than 5 700 people staying at these sites. TAC estimates stand at 6171 displaced people.

Civil society organisations have been meeting regularly with all levels of Government and other role players to:

- Improve conditions within the sites, and
- Facilitate the process of bringing in the correct agencies to assist with documentation and issues surrounding repatriation, resettlement and reintegration.

In addition civil society continues to provide huge volumes of humanitarian aid. This situation remains a crisis.

The latest meetings and reports have revealed a lack of action on the part of all levels of government in resolving what is a humanitarian disaster.

1. Conditions at Sites

- Conditions in the camps remain untenable. Safety and security remain uncertain; there is inadequate and insufficient food and other supplies coming in, and a lack of sufficient basic amenities such as toilets and showers. Government has not adopted and implemented basic international humanitarian standards as promised to civil society groups over two weeks ago.
- Children are particularly vulnerable, and have not received adequate food or care. Breast milk of some breast-feeding mothers has dried up due to poor diet and stress, and powdered baby formula delivery has been sporadic. Sterile bottles and reheating facilities have not been accessible.
- Winter storms have highlighted the inadequacy of the sites, especially those using tents, and further heightened the humanitarian crisis. The food tent and women?s tent as well as the tent serving as a Mosque at Youngsfield military base collapsed over the weekend. Flooding and leaking tents has been widely reported at all the tent sites.
- There has been no effort on the part of Provincial or Local government to open up buildings so as to clear the camps or place people closer to jobs, schools and other facilities.

2. Denial of Access

- A team of legal advice volunteers under the auspices of the Legal Resource Centre, (LRC), were explicitly denied access from entering Chrysalis Academy on Tuesday, 1st July by the site manager, Mr Steven Cohen. Relief deliveries and volunteers who have been assisting on the site for the last 6 weeks have also been denied access. This is extremely worrying, as refugees have not been getting the relief they need or the legal support they are constitutionally entitled to.
- Government representatives have not responded to a letter querying this and demanding that volunteers be allowed access.

- Human Rights Commission monitors and volunteers delivering aid have also been denied access to camps.
- HRC and civil society monitors, as well as volunteers were denied access to the hall where registration was taking place at Youngsfield Military Base on Tuesday 8 July to monitor the Home Affairs registration process. Certain displaced persons residing at the base were also locked out on both Tuesday 8 July and Wednesday 9 July for arriving late or refusing to sign up for documentation. Such action is illegal and unconstitutional.

3. Registration Process

- Home Affairs has stated that it will register foreign nationals who can ?prove? they were victims of the xenophobic attacks. This is impossible in many cases.
- They have started to issue drivers license size cards after photographing and fingerprinting all applicants.
- Some of the cards are Section 31 ? 2B Exemption Permits that entitle the bearer to reside in South Africa and access employment and education for 6 months. This includes ?undocumented persons?. Persons with documents (irrespective of the expiry date) are being issued cards but without Section 31 ? 2B Exemption being specified.
- Scanty information has been provided to the displaced persons and civil society about the nature of the process and utility of the exemption. The lack of consultation and heavy-handed approach by government officials has resulted in great confusion, insecurity, anger and suspicion.
- Home Affairs informed civil society that they plan to issue 8 000 such permits despite governments claims of approximately 18 000 to 20 000 affected persons.
- We call for clarification, consultation and a blanket moratorium on deportation.

4. Humanitarian Relief Aid

- Civil Society tabled a report at the Joint Operations Centre on Friday 27 June itemising deficiencies in infrastructure and basic amenities (such as toilets and showers) at 27 sites around Cape Town. Thus far the response from the province has been negligible, and our follow- up on 11 showed that 0 had been acted on.
- As agreed with provincial officials civil society, on behalf of displaced persons, has logged over 30 daily requests for food and other basics (such as nappies) with the JOC. Thus far our follow-up indicates that only 1 has been acted upon.
- Representatives, in particular Eldred de Klerk, from the Premiers office had promised to facilitate this process but staff at the JOC were unaware of this. We believe the failure lies at a political level for reneging on their promise to facilitate this process. After several meetings we hope to work cooperatively with the JOC and other civil servants.
- Civil Society continues to spend over half a million rand weekly in the provision of humanitarian aid. This excludes humanitarian discounts given by supply companies, material donations and the enormous time spent by volunteers and their substantial transport costs.

5. General

- The lack of co-ordinated response, adequate consultation and the provision of concrete information by province have created widespread insecurity in the camps.
- There has been no move on the part of government as regards compensation for lost and stolen property and emotional trauma during the violent attacks.
- According to government, the disaster ends on the 3rd September 2008, and the reintegration process will be complete by the end of July 2008. Given the current climate of unfulfilled promises and miscommunication, this seems highly unlikely, and begs the question, what happens if these deadlines are not met?

Refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people remain with an uncertain future and an uncomfortable, insecure present. Once again, civil society calls for major improvements in living conditions in the camps, and action on the part of government in resolving this crisis. We call on government to take seriously the voice, requests and feedback of the

displaced person population.

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