

Plan to help 15 000 Brits flee Zim

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By Peter Fabricius & Boyd Webb

The British government is reported to have drafted contingency plans to evacuate up to 15 000 of its nationals from Zimbabwe if the country falls into chaos.

British media recently reported that UK military commanders were reviewing contingency plans to evacuate up to 22 000 Britons amid growing concerns in Whitehall about Zimbabwe falling apart before the end of the year.

UK official sources have predicted that the rundown economy could collapse before Christmas and that anarchy could ensue.

Media reports said that under existing plans, Britons would be advised to find their own way out of Zimbabwe to a former military airbase at Antonvilla near Musina in Limpopo province.

The reports said the UK department of defence has been asked if it could help airlift Britons from there.

But it is understood London has drafted a contingency plan for evacuating Britons from Zimbabwe as it has for many other countries.

Details have not been revealed but the Britons would be flown out of South Africa and other neighbouring countries by scheduled or chartered flights.

The plan does not yet involve the military or any plan to airlift them from Antonvilla. However, the military could be pulled in later if the crisis in Zimbabwe became dangerous and military escorts were needed.

The UK government's evacuation plan is based on an estimate of 12 000 to 15 000 British nationals in Zimbabwe, not the 22 000 of the British media reports. And plans are very rough because Britain has no way of knowing where Britons would go if mayhem broke out.

They could cross into SA, Zambia, Mozambique and Botswana which makes precise planning impossible. The British government is co-ordinating its plans with these governments.

Meanwhile, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres has said refugee camps for Zimbabweans fleeing the turmoil of their country should only be a last resort.

Speaking after a two-day fact-finding mission to South Africa, he said, "Only those who have never lived in a refugee camp would advocate refugee camps as a solution for problems of this nature."

Guterres was addressing the media along with Home Affairs Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula in Johannesburg.

During his visit, Guterres, a former Portuguese prime minister, met President Thabo Mbeki and Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Aziz Pahad as well as several refugees in Johannesburg and Cape Town to discuss needs of displaced foreigners in South Africa.

He said to live in a refugee camp was extremely hard. He advised the governments of the region to deal with this problem with an effective humanitarian strategy and avoid an "encampment policy".

Guterres agreed that in certain extreme circumstances, refugee camps were the only way to provide assistance, but said he certainly hoped South Africa was far from that situation.

"I strongly hope that all the efforts to find a political solution will be successful," he said.

His stance falls in line with the government's position. It is at odds with opposition parties which criticised Home Affairs last week for sitting on a plan apparently commissioned in 2002, which proposed that 50 000 refugees could be accommodated at an abandoned military facility near Musina.

This contingency plan was allegedly drawn up by the department of public works for the department of home affairs.

But Mapisa-Nqakula denied the plan would ever have referred to a refugee camp and that it had only been established as a precautionary measure in case the Zimbabwean elections of 2002 turned violent.

"It was never a refugee camp ... it was developed for the 2002 elections in anticipation of a flow into South Africa, not necessarily of refugees, but of Zimbabweans, because in 2002 tensions were heightened in Zimbabwe politically," she said.

Mapisa-Nqakula has consistently rejected calls for the establishment of refugee camps, arguing that South Africa's policy was rather to integrate refugees into South African society.

An argument also mooted is that Zimbabweans fleeing their country could not under UN law be defined as refugees but rather as economic migrants.

Severe shortages in the country have caused an estimated 5 000 Zimbabweans to cross the border into South Africa every day in search of food, consumable goods and work.

However, Mapisa-Nqakula said many had no interest in remaining in South Africa longer than it took to provide for their families back home.

There are officially only 500 Zimbabwean refugees in the country, according to department spokesman Cleo Hosanna.

Guetteres agreed with the minister, saying in terms of the legal definition, a refugee was a person who was forced to flee their country to escape persecution.

"The Zimbabweans do not need to flee persecution but that does not mean they are not suffering," he said.

He said the UN would support the South African government in its initiatives to deal with the influx of immigrants and would ensure the international community did so too.

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