

Britain temporarily "suspends" deportation of Zimbabwean refugees

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For weeks the British government has been refusing asylum to political refugees from Zimbabwe, forcing them to return to a country where they face persecution, torture and possibly death.

The human rights group Amnesty International has highlighted the dangers such refugees face at the hands of government forces if they are returned to Zimbabwe. These include "harassment, arbitrary arrests, assaults and killings... rampant torture by the state and its proxies to bludgeon dissent".

At present at least seven Zimbabweans face imminent removal from the UK. One of them, who gave his name as "Paul", was interviewed by *BBC Radio Four* on January 9. He explained that he had been active in opposition politics in Zimbabwe as a member of the Liberty Party, and had been subjected to threats, intimidation and torture. He had travelled to the UK via South Africa, but the British authorities did not accept that he was a political refugee because he could not produce any documents.

Despite the fact that many Zimbabweans arriving in the UK bear the physical evidence of torture, and some require urgent medical treatment, the immigration authorities still routinely refuse to grant them refugee status.

A few hours after the *BBC* interview, Paul was taken to Heathrow airport where he was hustled onto a plane to return to Zimbabwe. His removal was only thwarted, when the South African Airlines flight refused to carry him because of "incorrect papers". The following day, the UK authorities then placed Paul on a Virgin Atlantic flight to Johannesburg, but the airline immediately contacted Amnesty International and the Immigration Service, and refused to accept him as a passenger.

On January 11, Paul was granted the right to a judicial review of his asylum application. Nevertheless, immigration officials still tried to deport him that same night. The *Observer* newspaper claims that it was only because of its intervention that for the third time in a week he was removed from a flight that would have taken him back to Zimbabwe.

The British government is well aware of the fate that

awaits oppositionists who have been forcibly returned to Zimbabwe. According to Amnesty International, at least 10 opposition supporters have been killed by pro-government militias since mid-December. This includes Laban Chiweta, who was burned to death in the town of Trojan Mine and Milton Chambati, who was hacked to death. Three Zimbabweans who were returned to Harare on January 7 have not been heard of since.

On Christmas Eve, Godfrey Dube was forced on to a British Airways flight to Zimbabwe. He was handcuffed and bleeding, having been beaten up by his guards because he resisted boarding the plane. He begged his fellow passengers to help him and eventually a member of BA staff insisted he should not fly. He has since had a message from his family in Zimbabwe that the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) was waiting for his flight in Harare.

More than 180 Zimbabweans are currently awaiting the results of asylum applications in Britain. They are incarcerated in places like Campsfield and Yarl's Wood Detention Centres, where access to legal representation is severely restricted. There have been reports of members of Zimbabwe's CIO infiltrating these centres and spying on the inmates.

While the British parliament was in recess over the Christmas period, Home Secretary David Blunkett introduced new regulations to further restrict the rights of asylum seekers. The changes were rushed through, coming into effect on January 7, one day before parliament reconvened.

Under the new rules, the Home Office will be notified about the result of an appeal before the appellant, enabling immigration staff to turn up unannounced on the doorstep of an asylum seeker's home and immediately remove them to a detention centre if they lose their appeal. Margaret Lally, deputy chief executive of the Refugee Council said, "We are concerned that this change in the law would result in asylum seekers being quickly removed from the country without the possibility of seeking legal advice."

There is widespread opposition to the rule of President

Robert Mugabe's Zanu-PF party, which has been in power ever since independence in 1980. For most of this period Mugabe has worked closely with the West, and throughout the 1990s his government implemented International Monetary Fund policies aimed at restructuring the economy and slashing public spending.

However, more recently, the corruption and nepotism that is endemic in the regime has become a hindrance to the interests of international investors and has brought Mugabe into increasing conflict with the IMF and Western governments.

Mugabe is determined to win the up-coming presidential election in March, and is prepared to use any method to do so. With the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) receiving strong backing in Zimbabwe's urban centres, the policy of "farm occupations", where white-owned farms are taken over by Zanu-PF supporters, is aimed at shoring up Mugabe's political support in the countryside.

On January 10, the Zimbabwe parliament passed the draconian Public Order and Security Bill, in an attempt to stifle any independent political activity. The bill makes it illegal to "undermine the authority of the president" or "engender hostility towards him". It forces everyone to carry identity cards and also gives the police unprecedented authority, including the power to break up political meetings.

Another bill introduced this week would ban foreign journalists from the country and force local journalists to register with the government or face two years imprisonment.

Supporters of the Zanu-PF have a free hand to attack anyone associated with the opposition. Many of the assaults have been directed at MDC candidates, activists and supporters. Opposition party offices have been firebombed; journalists and vendors of independent newspapers have been attacked.

According to the *Associated Press*, police fired tear gas on an opposition rally in Buhera, 80 miles south of Harare on January 12. *AP* also report that seven opposition supporters were admitted to hospital in Harare, their condition being listed as critical, after they were beaten by Zanu-PF militants.

The following day, 22 MDC members were arrested in Kwe Kwe, a town in central Zimbabwe, following clashes with supporters of the ruling Zanu-PF party. The conflict started when the government supporters burnt down the MDC office in the town. The MDC claims that at least 90 of its supporters have been murdered by pro-government militias over the past two years, whilst tens of thousands of others have been tortured.

Zimbabwe faces an unprecedented social and economic

crisis. The country suffers from an annual inflation rate of 100 percent, 60 percent unemployment and one of the highest HIV infection rates in the world. In contrast to the suffering of the vast majority of the population, the government has recently awarded a 100 percent pay increase to the armed forces, including the police. Much of the pro-Western MDC's political support is in the towns and cities, where millions of workers are enduring increasing poverty and unemployment.

For its part, the British government is utilising the despotic actions of the Mugabe regime against its political opponents to pose as a defender of democratic rights. However, given the blatant attacks on oppositionists in Zimbabwe, the continued deportation of asylum seekers back to Harare, where they face intimidation or even death, makes a mockery of such claims by the Blair government.

Only last week, Home Office Minister Lord Rooker stated he did "not accept that the situation is so serious that it required the suspension of removals" to Zimbabwe. After a meeting with Oliver Letwin and Simon Hughes, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Home Affairs spokesmen, the Home Office suddenly announced on Tuesday it was "suspending" the deportation of any further asylum seekers to Zimbabwe for 24-hours, pending a "new assessment" of conditions in the country. According to *BBC* radio news, the suspension has since been extended until after Zimbabwe's presidential elections.

Human rights groups have cautiously welcomed the move. Amnesty International said it had "always urged that there is the need for extreme caution in deporting Zimbabweans in the present climate".



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