

Continuing inhumanity - 13 Oct 2008

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As the refugee camps around South Africa are closed, the foreigners who have lived in them since May this year are dispersing. Many have been refused asylum on the grounds that they are 'economic migrants' - not a UN asylum category. In many cases this may be true. But perhaps we need to start looking at the definition of an 'economic refugee' instead of conveniently using this as a reason to send thousands of people back across our borders to uncertain lives. A recent BBC documentary about Somalia certainly belied Home Affairs' statement that this country is now 'safe'.

Those who are trying to reintegrate into their previous communities - or into new communities - are finding it equally hard. At least eight people from the Soetwater camp alone have been murdered when they tried to pick up the pieces of their lives outside refugee camps. The government refuses to recognise these deaths as being as a result of xenophobia - instead saying that they were normal crime - as though crime is ever normal.

This morning's Cape Times carries a story about a young man from Mozambique - certainly an economic refugee under the current definition since that country is stable once more. He has been given two weeks to leave the country, but he is HIV positive and suffering from tuberculosis. He is unlikely to survive the journey. Local doctors say that he needs to be on treatment for both infections. I am sure that there are plenty of people who - like our unfeeling government - think that he should go home and let the Mozambiquan authorities deal with him. In the long term - certainly. But let our authorities at least let him receive sufficient treatment so that he is strong enough to make the journey. I will watch the follow up with interest.

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