

# SA's winter freeze highlights homeless crisis

The unusually severe blast of winter weather that recently swept across South Africa, killing at least 17 people through exposure, highlighted the country's chronic housing shortage.

Johannesburg – South Africa's several million strong homeless population was particularly hard hit as temperatures plunged to record lows in many parts of the country.

"I really thought my baby would die if I didn't get her somewhere warm," said a 22-year-old Zimbabwean woman speaking inside the crowded corridors of a Methodist church in central Johannesburg. "I have nowhere else to go".

The woman, who declined to give her name, was wrapped in an old sweater. Two scarves were tied around her neck. She was one of more than 900 people who crammed inside the drafty church as plunging temperatures chased Johannesburg's homeless from the streets.

The South African Weather Service said 54 temperature records were set as snow, hail and heavy rain descended on the country. Many cities recorded record low temperatures while others hit new marks for the heaviest one-day rainfall.

Some commentators suggested climate change might be at least partly to blame for the icy weather, although a weather service representative said it was not unusual for two or three particularly bad spells to hit the country during the winter months.

## Housing backlog

Whatever the weather's cause, South Africa's homeless and poor were left particularly vulnerable. The ruling African National Congress government, led by President Thabo Mbeki, has been on a furious building spree during the dozen years since the fall of apartheid, but the housing shortfall still stands at an estimated 2.5 million homes.

According to the Geneva-based nongovernmental organisation, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions, 7.5 million South Africans lack access to adequate housing and secure tenure in South Africa. At least one-third of the population lives in poverty and while the official unemployment rate is given as around 20%, unofficial estimates put the number closer to 40%.

Even those with homes remain vulnerable during the harsh winter. Millions live in small, poorly ventilated, poorly insulated wooden shacks built on informal settlements, the structures offering little protection from the cold. Shack fires caused many of the 17 deaths recorded during the past week when braziers or gas heaters ignited. Others died from asphyxiation, while faulty – and often illegal – electrical connections have also been blamed for shack-fire deaths.

Community Service teams and charities in Johannesburg and other cities worked to prevent winter deaths by handing out blankets and warning of the dangers of faulty or unguarded heaters.

## Packed shelters

But for those without a home to go to – especially the millions of refugees who have flocked to South Africa from across the continent – churches, mosques and hostels are often the only shelters available during winter.

"We don't discriminate here, we have people from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Kenya, Burundi, Swaziland, from right across Africa and of course from South Africa too," said Paul Verryn, Bishop of Johannesburg's central Methodist church. "This has been a very bad start to winter, but we do our best to feed the people who come here and give them what bedding we can".

Innocent, 21, a South African who finds what work he can in Johannesburg's central business district, huddled with dozens of others on a stairwell inside the church. "Sometimes I stay with a friend, sometimes I go to my parents, but they're a long way from here, so sometimes I have nowhere else to go," he said. "I get some soup here in the church and I am out of the cold".

Among the refugees gathered inside the church were doctors, accountants, teachers and businessmen.

"South Africa must be hospitable and generous to these people", said Verryn. "Instead of seeing them as refugees we should see them as people who should be helped and who might, in turn, help our country because we have such a huge skills shortage here".

## Temperatures dip

Hostels were filled to capacity as temperatures dipped across the country, including in the coastal city, Cape Town.

"We have 14 shelters and house about 1,500 people per night but we are planning to build more," said Hassan Khan, director of the charitable organisation Haven Night Shelters. "We need a great deal more blankets and food...We are under a tremendous amount of pressure to care for the many who need it, especially during the winter months when sleeping on the streets is no longer an option".

Khan said his group was working closely with both municipal and provincial authorities to find a long-term solution to South Africa's almost overwhelming housing woes.

"I would have to say the problem is getting worse", Khan said. "If people give a little bit of money to children on the streets, they are actually increasing the problem because they are making it possible for someone to continue living on the streets, but that is no solution. We need to get these people off the streets for good".

Many are pinning their hopes of a housing renaissance riding on the massive infrastructure development and job creation expected to accompany the arrival to South Africa of the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

"Government has provided two million homes in a dozen years, but the big challenge will be getting the whole country working together on this problem", Khan said. "We hope 2010 will be the real push against homelessness...We need to get the message out to the world".

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