

REFUGEE COUNCIL USA

3211 4TH Street, NE Washington, DC 20017-1194

Tel: 202-541-5402/04 Fax: 202-722-8737 www.refugeecouncilusa.org

VIA FACSIMILE: 202-282-8401

November 17, 2005

The Honorable Michael Chertoff
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
Naval Security Station
3801 Nebraska Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20393

Dear Secretary Chertoff:

We, members of the Refugee Council USA, a coalition of 20 non-governmental organizations based in the United States that advocate for the rights and protection of refugees, are writing to urge you to take immediate measures to respond to the current crisis in Zimbabwe, which jeopardizes the security of millions in both urban and rural areas. Specifically, we ask that the Department of Homeland Security grant Zimbabwean nationals in the United States Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and that DHS adjudicators be provided with materials and training updating them on the current situation in Zimbabwe, to better inform the adjudication process for asylum and other forms of relief.

The human rights crisis in Zimbabwe at the end of 2004 was well summarized in the US Department of State Country Report on Human Right Practices issued in February 2005:

The Government of Zimbabwe has conducted a concerted campaign of violence, repression, and intimidation. This campaign has been marked by disregard for human rights, the rule of law, and the welfare of Zimbabwe's citizens. Torture by various methods is used against political opponents and human rights advocates. War veterans, youth brigades, and police officers act with sustained brutality against political enemies. The Mugabe regime has also targeted other institutions of government, including the judiciary and police. Judges have been harassed into submission or resignation, replaced by Mugabe's cronies. The news media have been restricted and suppressed, with offending journalists arrested and beaten. Land seizures continue to be used as a tool for political and social oppression, and opponents of these destructive policies are subject to violent reprisals.

Since that report was written, however, the crisis in Zimbabwe has greatly deepened due to the violent mass destruction of homes and markets in several urban areas under a government program called Operation Murambastvina (translated as "throw out the trash"). This new policy has claimed hundreds of lives and resulted in the displacement

of an estimated 700,000 people, directly or indirectly affecting some 2.4 million people, nearly one quarter of the national population. Since the operation began in May 2005, hundreds of thousands of women, men and children have become homeless, without access to adequate food, water, sanitation, or health care. Education for thousands of school age children has been disrupted. Many of the sick, including those with HIV and AIDS, no longer have access to health care of any kind. The current socio-political crisis in Zimbabwe is so grave that the United Nations has estimated that some five million Zimbabweans will be threatened with starvation this year.

Thousands of Zimbabwean nationals living in the United States – including students and professionals – where asylum is not a viable option, yet would find it impossible to return to Zimbabwe safely due to the extraordinary conditions of political and economic insecurity that currently prevail. For these individuals, Temporary Protected Status is needed in order to prevent them from being forced to return home to a country that is unwilling or unable to provide its citizens with basic protections.

There is a second group of Zimbabwean nationals in the United States, those who are seeking protection from persecution through the asylum process, and there are also Zimbabwean refugees in other countries who are seeking U.S. resettlement. In order that the claims of these individuals can receive fully informed consideration in view of the recent actions and continuing policies of the Zimbabwean government, we urge that DHS asylum officers and adjudicators receive updated information and training regarding the current human rights abuses being carried out by that government against certain groups within their population. We base the request on information we have received from Zimbabwean asylum applicants and asylum service providers, which leads us to believe that a more complete understanding of the severity and the countrywide nature of the evolving crisis in Zimbabwe is needed.

We are attaching a fact sheet and the following web links by government agencies and independent human rights organizations which underline the nature of our concerns:

1. *UN Report on Fact-Finding Mission to Zimbabwe to assess the Impact of Operation Murambatsvina* by the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlement Issues, Mrs. Anna Kajumulo Tibajuka (18 July 2005): <http://www.unhabitat.org/documents/zimbabwreport.pdf>.
2. U.S. Department of State's *Zimbabwe Country Report on Human Rights Practices* (28 February 2005): <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2004/41634.htm>.
3. Human Rights Watch report *Clear the Filth: Mass Evictions and Demolitions in Zimbabwe* (September 2005): <http://hrw.org/backgrounder/africa/zimbabwe0905/>.

We would welcome an opportunity for further dialogue, and request an opportunity to meet with you and your staff to discuss this important issue. Please contact Berta Romero, Coordinator of the Refugee Council USA, at telephone: 202-541-5402 to schedule a meeting at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Matt Wilch
Chair, Committee on Protection
Refugee Council USA

On behalf of the following agencies:

John Salzberg, Washington Representative
Center for Victims of Torture

Joseph Roberson, Director
Church World Service/Immigration and Refugee Program

C. Richard Parkins, Director
Episcopal Migration Ministries

Tsehay Teferra, Executive Director
Ethiopian Community Development Council

Eleanor Acer, Director, Refugee Program
Human Rights First

Arnold Leibowitz, President
International Refugee Research Institute

Robert Carey, Vice President for Resettlement
International Rescue Committee

Fr. Kenneth Gavin, S.J., Director
Jesuit Refugee Service/USA

Dr. Pary Karadaghi, Executive Director
Kurdish Human Rights Watch, Inc.

Ralston H. Deffenbaugh, Jr., President
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

Doua Thor, Executive Director
Southeast Asia Resource Action Center

Sammy Mah, Executive Director
World Relief

cc: Sandra Hodgkinson, Director for International Justice, NSC
Allyson Ho, Special Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, NSC
Robert Divine, Acting Director, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, DHS
Richard Greene, Acting Assistant Secretary of State, for DOS/PRM
Joseph Cuddihy, Director, Asylum and Refugee Affairs, DHS/USCIS
Kelly Clements, Acting Director, Office of Policy and Resource Planning, PRM/DOS
Bruce Nueling, Country Officer for Zimbabwe, DOS
Colleen Cook, TPS Liaison, DHS
Toniann Wright, TPS Liaison, DOS/PRM