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Repatriation wave grows despite closure of centre

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The closure of Pietermaritzburg's official repatriation centre in Mayor's Walk last week has not slowed the growing number of foreign nationals seeking to return home, with over a hundred more Malawians now joining Zimbabweans at a makeshift camp in Havelock Road.

The temporary camp, run with the assistance of non-profit organisation Afrika Spear, started as an informal camp for Zimbabweans but has quickly become a gathering point for other migrant nationals, who say they no longer feel safe in their communities and are seeking help to return to their home countries after the nationwide June 30 anti-illegal immigration demonstrations.

Afrika Spear spokesperson Bethwell Mbelu said the organisation was concerned by the steady stream of arrivals.

"Once people hear about the venue, they come here almost every day," he told *The Witness* yesterday.

The camp is accommodating 71 Zimbabweans, 139 Malawians and one Mozambican, all of whom are seeking assistance

to return to their respective countries. On Friday, five buses carrying Zimbabwean nationals left Pietermaritzburg for the country's consulate in Pretoria, where they will be processed before travelling to the Beitbridge border.

"We have seen more people coming in. All of them are saying they feel threatened in their communities and wish to go back home. They don't have money for bus fare. Among the Malawians are families with children, including a baby who is just one week old. That is what makes the situation very worrying," Mbelu said.

He said about 2 000 Zimbabweans had been assisted to return home since last week.

The Zimbabwean government has urged its citizens to welcome those returning from South Africa. President Emmerson Mnangagwa also addressed the issue, while his government reported that nearly 60 000 Zimbabweans had returned from South Africa.

The recent wave of departures follows growing anti-illegal immigration protests across South Africa, which culminated in nationwide demonstrations on June 30 af-

ter activist group March and March called on undocumented foreign nationals to leave the country.

Government figures released last week showed that 11 065 Zimbabweans had been repatriated through collaboration between the South African and Zimbabwean governments, while a further 47 703 had returned voluntarily. Of those repatriated through official channels, 2 449 were adult men, 2 407 were adult women and 4 955 were minors.

Meanwhile, the Departments of Home Affairs and Public Works last week announced the establishment of a temporary repatriation facility at the Beitbridge border post. Built in approximately 96 hours, the centre includes processing offices, sleeping quarters and ablution facilities, and will serve as the primary processing hub for migrants leaving South Africa.

Home Affairs Minister Leon Schreiber said the large-scale operation demonstrated government's readiness to manage repatriations "in a lawful, orderly and dignified manner".

• Additional reporting by *The Citizen*.