

# Joburg cops vow to keep vagrants away

## Hundreds of Zimbabwean refugees arrested for loitering in city centre

ALEX ELISEEV

**P**OLICE have vowed to continue the crackdown on vagrants squatting in Joburg's inner city, intensifying it as the 2010 World Cup approaches.

This follows Friday's midnight raid on Zimbabwean refugees living on the pavement outside the Johannesburg High Court and the Central Methodist Church.

The operation, led by the Joburg Metro Police Department (JMPD), has drawn condemnation for the way officers arrested about 345 people, including women and children, and denied human rights groups access to those needing medical help.

"This is a campaign and we will continue with it," JMPD spokesman Chief Superintendent Wayne Mthunar said yesterday. "There will be follow-up operations... the focus is to clean up the city."

But Bishop Paul Verryn, who runs the Methodist church, has reacted with anger and called on police to focus on more serious crimes such as hijackings. Speaking from the US, Verryn said the crackdown was a political decision. "Isn't there better work for politicians to do instead of victimising already victimised people?"

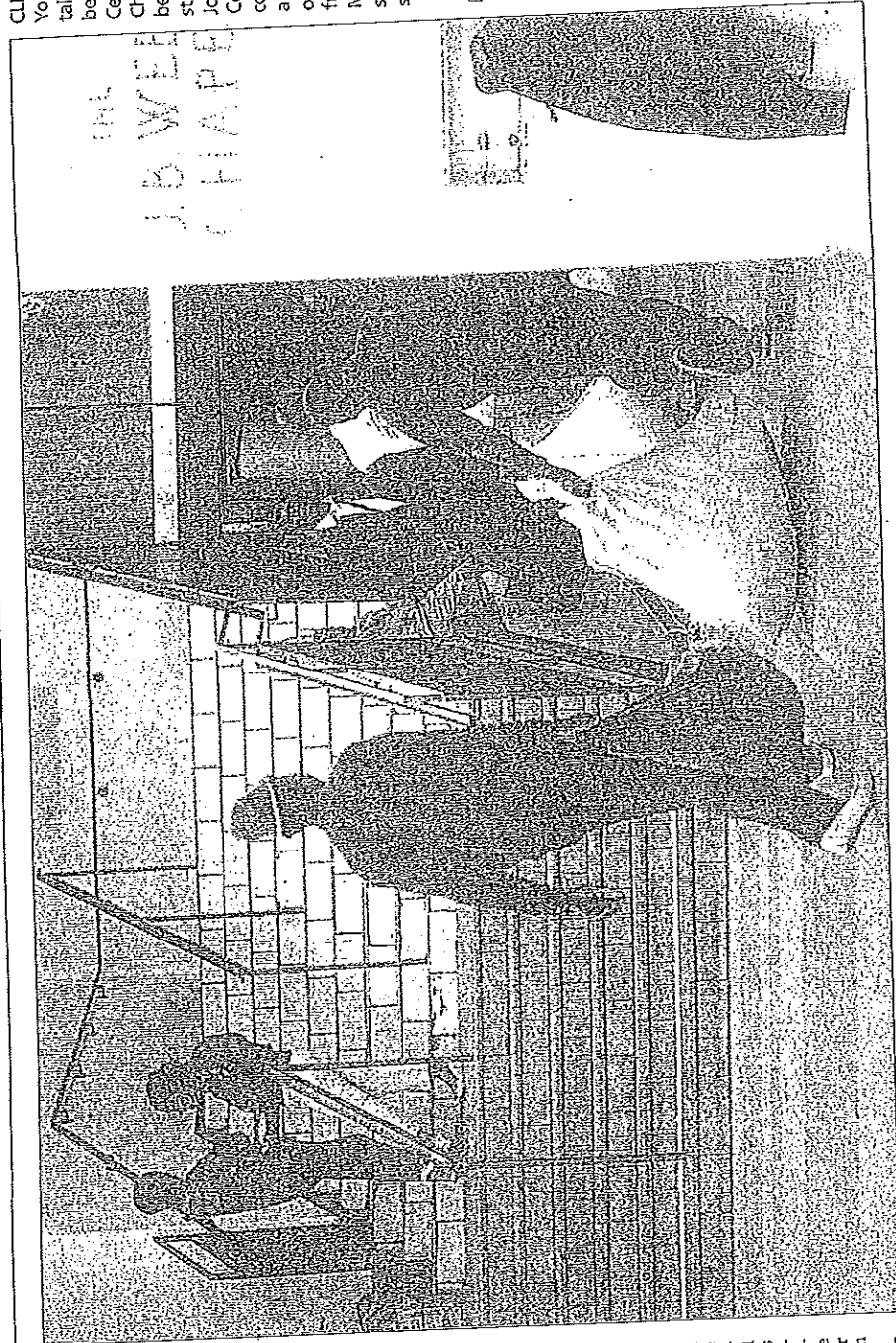
He said the South African government was deluded in thinking the crisis in Zimbabwe would be resolved soon, thus easing the burden here.

Verryn said the people arrested were not criminals and their harassment could increase xenophobic hatred and erode trust between citizens and law enforcers.

Mthunar, however, claimed there was evidence that vagrants were blocking the street by sleeping on it and robbing passers-by. The JMPD had received numerous complaints and had monitored the situation. Last week, the Johannesburg High Court ordered the JMPD to remove vagrants after complaints were received from judges fearing for their safety.

"When you have a situation where a judge can't get into the building because of people blocking the entrance, something needs to be done," Gauteng MEC for Community Safety Khabisi Mosunkutu said on Saturday.

Those arrested were charged with loitering and for "sleeping on the street". Mthunar said. About 100 women and children were released on a warning, while the rest either paid a R300 admission of guilt fine or were detained. Those charged were expected to appear in court today.



**CLEARING UP:** Young men help to take people's belongings into the Central Methodist Church that had been left on the street around the Johannesburg High Court, after police cordoned off the area to stop the overflow of people from the Central Methodist Church sleeping on the streets.

PICTURES: JENNIFER BRUCE

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# Man detained while rushing pregnant woman to hospital

ALEX ELISEEV

**A** MAN rushing a pregnant woman to hospital was among hundreds of vagrants arrested outside the Johannesburg High Court on Friday night.

Yesterday he described his ordeal during which he spent 12 hours behind bars and saw

how officers used pepper spray and stun guns on those who resisted arrest.

His identity is being withheld as he was due to appear in court today.

A woman inside the Central Methodist Church went into labour on Friday night and was escorted out of the building.

On the streets, dozens of police were rounding up vagrants.

"I took her to the car but a metro cop pushed me with the people (being lured up outside the court). Some were resisting arrest and they (officers) were using force. They were spraying pepper spray and shocking them. It was a commotion."

He said refugees were forced to abandon their belongings. Some were barefoot when they were taken away in the "big SAPS trucks".

The group were driven to the Joburg Central police station, where the paperwork began. The man said he witnessed officers forcing people

to sign admission of guilt documents as the abuse continued. "It was terrible. We were standing all night."

The man was lucky to be bailed out around midday on Saturday but said most others were not. Some were not allowed to leave even though their employers had come to

pay the R300 fine. He described the raid as "people being arrested for being poor".

"Looks like it's a crime to be poor. I don't choose to sleep on the street. It's not voluntary," he said, adding that the fear of arrest was forcing a huge crush of people at the church.