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STREET LIFE: NGOs are up in arms over the latest arrest of people near the Methodist Church.

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## No solution in sight for destitute Zimbabweans as arrests persist

**LOUISE FLANAGAN**

THERE is no national political solution on the cards for destitute Zimbabweans sleeping on Joburg's streets, but city officials are trying to house them, while metro police plan to continue arrests.

"The solution is to resolve the situation in Zimbabwe," said Department of Home Affairs spokesman Ronnie Mamoepa.

Yesterday Mamoepa couldn't say how many of the immigrants arrested in a weekend raid on those sleeping outside the Central Methodist Church in the inner city were sent to the Lindela Repatriation Centre for deportation.

"Home Affairs was not involved" in the raid, he noted.

Mamoepa said the world should lift sanctions against Zimbabwe so that it could rebuild the economy, adding that the majority of Zimbabweans in South Africa were economic migrants.

Destitute Zimbabweans still stream into South Africa, many heading for the Methodist church, which is seen as a safe haven.

Many sleep inside the church, but hundreds more sleep outside, infuriating local businesses and officials in the nearby high court.

Friday night's arrest of 345 people near the church was condemned by Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) and the Legal Resources Centre (LRC).

"Nursing staff from the MSF clinic, operating at the church,

witnessed police officers manhandling the Zimbabweans and migrants during the arrests. When officers rounded the group up, they threatened some with electric stun guns and pushed them to the ground with force," said MSF.

The NGO said two people were severely beaten by police.

Yesterday, police agreed to release seven people on medical grounds, including a pregnant woman and two patients suffering acute psychosis, said MSF spokesman Borrie la Grange.

The LRC's Jason Brickhill questioned the arrests when more than 300 people are due to be moved within days to a shelter provided by the council.

"It does seem very odd to be on the one hand making plans to provide accommodation to people and on the other to be arresting them," said Brickhill.

He said those arrested were being charged only with "petty offences" like loitering, public indecency and public disorder.

The organisations intend helping those arrested, who were due to appear in court today, and expect to discuss the matter with Community Safety MEC Khabisi Mosunkutu this week.

"There can be no justification for continuing to detain them, which... appears to be intended only to intimidate people who are already marginalised," the LRC, LHR and Aids Law Project said in a joint statement.

"Some destitute South Africans are among those in police custody. Not a single person has been charged with any serious criminal offence."

The NGOs said at least eight minors remained in custody.

Yesterday the City of Johannesburg said it was trying to arrange shelter for the immigrants. City spokesman Nthatisi Modingoane said help was planned for at least 1 150 people.

Modingoane said a council-owned building would be ready to house 300 "vulnerable entrants to the inner city" next week.

This would help the "most vulnerable". Another 700 people would be accommodated in the second phase and the UN Development Programme would relocate 150 refugees to NGO shelters.

Modingoane called on businesses and NGOs to offer help.

He said metro police, the SA Police Service and the council would "ensure proper management of the precinct around the Methodist church".

While council officials organise shelters, the metro police will continue with arrests.

"Those people must do their jobs and we must do our job," said metro police Director David Tembe. "We'll have more raids."

He said anyone sleeping on the streets would be targeted. "It's got nothing to do with foreigners."

Tembe said metro police were obliged to enforce bylaws, which made loitering an offence.