

Squatters' housing in South Africa

Photograph by OXFAM

THE DILEMMA OF RETURN

An estimated 40,000 South African political exiles have left their country since the early 1960s. Many are still outside South Africa, including the political activists of the 1960s and the youth who left later to acquire military skills. In the light of recent reforms, however, repatriation is clearly on the cards.

Most of the literature on repatriation deals with it as if it were purely an exercise in logistics. Treatment of the human dimension is strikingly inadequate and the tendency is rather to depersonalise refugees to undifferentiated 'masses' or 'flows'. This article starts to redress this imbalance and explores the prospects for repatriation to South Africa from the perspective of the political, social and economic conditions that returning exiles will find and the psychosocial problems that they are likely to experience. Although often considered separately, these two aspects of return are closely related.

The South African Context

The OAU outlines the central criterion for repatriation as being a change of circumstances in the country of origin that will allow returnees 'to take up a normal and peaceful life without fear of being disturbed or punished'. In reality, however, many repatriations do not occur in the context of clear-cut changes such as the end of a war, the withdrawal of a colonial power or a change in government. South Africa is a prime example of this.

Are the changes now taking place in South Africa fundamental enough to guarantee the safety of returnees? The unbanning of political parties means that previously unacceptable public issues, such as power sharing, are now being debated. However, what constitutes a 'political crime' has still to be decided, and opinions vary as to the adequacy of the reforms. The latter can be seen as a retrogressive step which simply takes the country back forty years, to a situation where black opposition was legal. The South African economy is saddled by debt, unemployment and capital outflow. The combination of a negative economic environment, political instability and international isolation have forced the government to introduce reforms as an attempt to save the country from economic collapse rather than as a 'change of heart'.

It is clear that the fate of political exiles will be a test case for South Africa's international prestige. Repatriation would give additional international credibility to the government and is therefore one political incentive for their return.

The Psychosocial Context of Repatriation

The following description of some of the psychosocial problems that are likely to arise during the process of repatriation is based on interviews with twenty adult South African exiles carried out in November and December 1990 when the euphoria that accompanied the initial announcement of reforms had subsided. All are professionals or students living in Europe, sixteen are black Africans and four are white. The aim was to explore current attitudes to and conceptions of what going back to South Africa means.

Primary Characteristics of Reintegration

A convenient way to consider the human face of repatriation is to distinguish between primary and secondary characteristics of reintegration. Primary characteristics are inherent or intrinsic to the process of return. Secondary characteristics accompany the process of return but are not essential to it (FASIC 1981).

Fifteen of those interviewed had definitely taken the decision to go back. As the average duration of exile for this sample was 15 years, the exiles are having to acknowledge that they must adapt to a very different society. The various reasons for wanting to go back amounted essentially to a desire to be part of a changing South Africa.

All the exiles interviewed are politically active people and perceive their return as a continuation of their political work. While insisting that they are not going back to reintegrate with apartheid, there was some ambiguity arising from distrust of the government: going back means returning to a social order which is essentially the same as the one which triggered their decision to leave. All wanted information about what to expect on arriving home and emphasised the uncertainties of recent developments. The need for information was stressed because of the danger of misinformation from the government-controlled media in South Africa.

Secondary Characteristics of Reintegration

Emotional disturbances, family problems, economic and employment problems are some examples of secondary characteristics of reintegration which I shall consider here. These problems may be a consequence of primary characteristics, or they may reflect personality and previous socio-historical experiences, or be a consequence of the broader social context.

Emotional Disturbances

The few existing empirical studies of the emotional disturbances of reintegration indicate that among returnees who show emotional disorder, the disorder originates either before or during the exile period. This may relate to the problems of integration: for example, none of those interviewed felt they

had fully integrated with people in the various host countries they stayed in (although there is an obvious need to distinguish between not being integrated and not wanting to integrate).

Alienation was one of the most commonly cited negative experiences of exile, irrespective of country of asylum. It was expressed in various ways; as not being accepted by people, or being cut off from family. In Europe, alienation was linked to racism by all the black respondents.

Family break-up was another frequently cited negative experience. Those who have this experience preferred not to



South African Police

discuss it in detail. This phenomenon can refer to disavowal: the pain of the reality of family breakup being the reason for reluctance to be open about it. In some cases, such negative experiences can constitute predisposing factors to emotional disturbances.

Sixteen of the twenty exiles agreed that 'the best place for an exile is home.' As a result of previous work (Majodina 1989), I have found that South African exiles regard any expression of an emotional problem to be a sign of weakness implying the use of strong defence mechanisms to repress psychological problems. Returning home can acquire the symbolic meaning



Photograph by OXFAM

of going back to a familiar place which does not require such defenses and can easily trigger the onset of overt emotional disturbances. Indeed, a study of Chilean returnees showed that once they had returned home, they threw caution to the wind (FASIC 1981). Home-coming brought such a huge sense of relief that it weakened psychological defenses, and conflicts that had long been repressed reached consciousness.

Family Problems

Fifteen of the exiles expected to have problems in reintegrating with their families in South Africa, due to the long period of absence. They are aware that they have acquired different values in exile and may not quite fit back in with the family life they left behind. They also recognise that in South Africa too, family members will have developed new attitudes and be in new situations which may not correspond with or be compatible to expectations. Problems were anticipated arising out of high expectations families would have of returnees. 14 of the respondents did not think they would in fact meet these expectations.

On the other hand, all expected to be warmly welcomed and took it for granted that they would receive continued emotional support from the family. As the dream of going home can take the form of a triumphant return, problems may arise if the reality does not match expectations or if the dream is not realised. Some, if not the majority, of returnees will have to live with close family members and in most cases this will mean sharing the small three or four roomed housing units accommodating as many as twelve or more people. This will inevitably create new sources of stress and the need to establish new kinds of relationships. Returnees and their families need a period of adjustment to share experiences and to come to terms with each others' different circumstances. In reality, this may not happen; a situation that is bound to have negative consequences. When conflicts do arise, family members tend not to look beyond their immediate situation to the broader socio-economic and political factors contributing to their problems. The common human reaction is to over-personalize the conflict, pointing the blame at individuals for any failure in personal relationships.

Economic and Employment Problems

There is little doubt that South Africa faces another year of negative economic growth, and unemployment is a huge problem. All felt that finding a job would be a prerequisite for integration, but were aware that finding suitable employment would be difficult. Some exiles do not have marketable skills, the old and sick will not qualify for jobs or pensions. Some only acquired military skills, and there is currently little prospect for their absorption into the South African Defense Force. There are already clear indications that those who

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gained their qualifications in Eastern Block countries will face job discrimination and, if present trends continue, it will be professional people trained in the West who will be given priority in the job market.

Finding accommodation will also be a problem in the context of the existing housing crisis. Unemployment and very high crime rates add to the insecurity of urban life. At the emotional level, feelings of marginalisation and alienation will inevitably resurface.

Political, social and economic conditions are closely related to the psychosocial outcomes of the process of reintegration. On the other hand reintegration can be perceived as the consequence not only of the actual physical act of return, but also of the individual returnee's personal characteristics and psychosocial history, and the socio-economic and political conditions they are returning to.

Although I have concentrated on the obstacles accompanying repatriation, it is not necessarily a painful and negative event. It can also be a positive experience that facilitates personal growth without threatening psychological stability. Attempting to understand the problems of reintegration is a useful starting point for the development of appropriate preventative measures that can make the process of return less stressful.

References:

FASIC 1981. 'A Social-Psychological Study of Twenty-Five Returning Families'. Presented at a seminar on Latin American Exiles entitled 'Mental Health and Exile'.

Majodina, Z. 1989. 'Exile as a Chronic Stressor'. *International Journal of Mental Health* Vol. 18(1).

This article is extracted from a longer paper entitled 'Prospects for Repatriation: A Psychosocial Study of South African Exiles', by Zonke Majodina, 1991.

The repatriation of Zimbabwean refugees from Mozambique, Zambia and Botswana in time for the independence elections of February 1980 was the subject of two papers presented at the 'Symposium on Social and Economic Aspects of Mass Voluntary Return of Refugees from one African Country to Another' held in Harare, Zimbabwe, 12-14 March 1991. Here RPN extracts some of the themes from these papers which relate to the process of return.

The return to Zimbabwe at the end of the liberation war fits a classic model of repatriation: refugees returning to their country of origin after cessation of conflict, facilitated by UNHCR. Even in this case, however, the repatriation depended critically on refugees' own informal networks, and on channels created independently of the UN effort. Together these dealt with more returnees than did the UN system, as many refugees chose not to use formal channels out of suspicion and frustration.

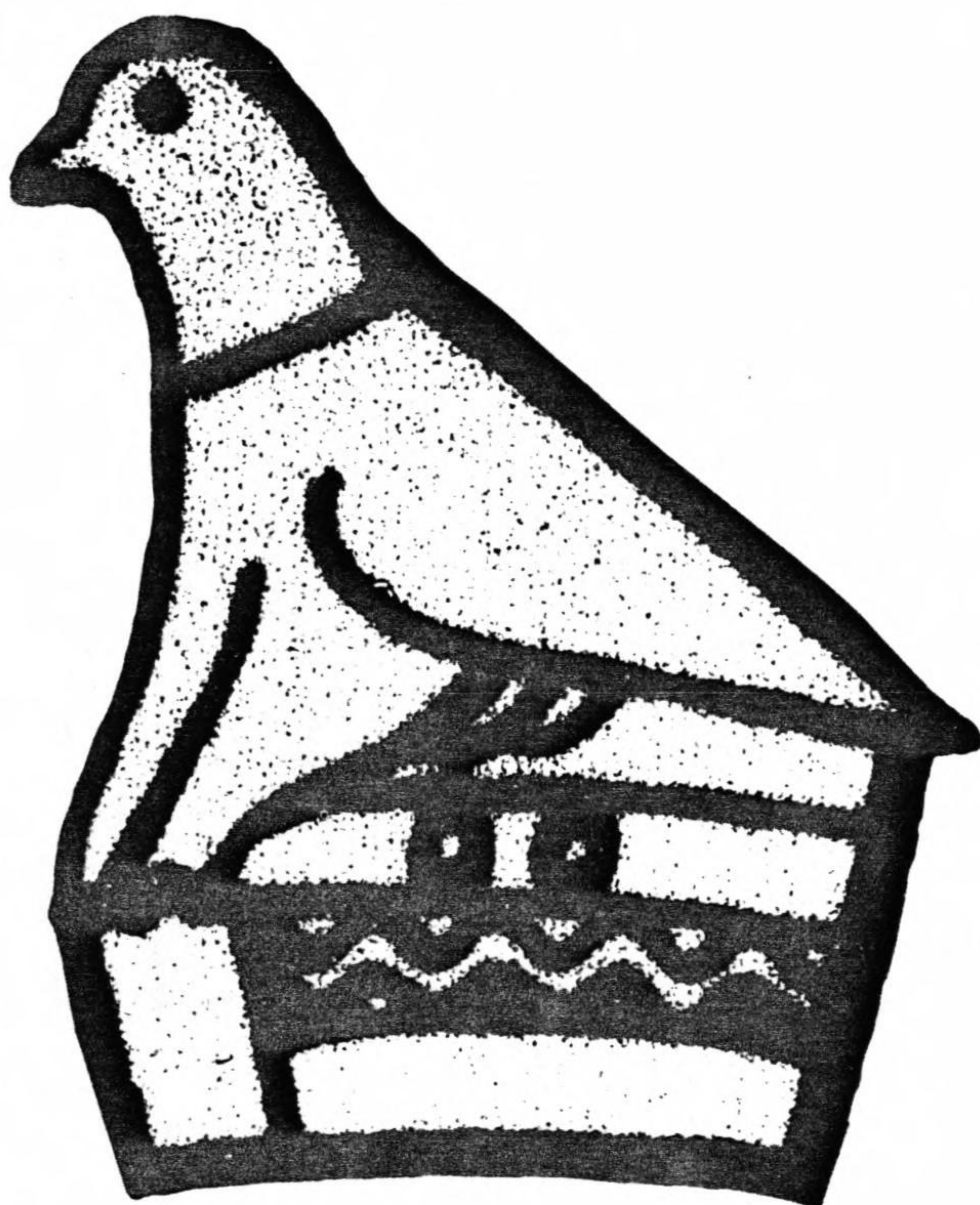
The first paper, by Jeremy Jackson emphasises the key role played by local institutions. In the second, Stella Makanya questions the 'success' of the operation from the point of view of international monitoring and guarantees of safety due to the extent of harassment and control by Rhodesian forces.

LOCAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE ZIMBABWEAN REPATRIATION

Shortly after the news of the Lancaster House constitutional agreement, and 35 days before the elections scheduled for February 1980, UNHCR and its two implementing partners Christian Care and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare began the first phase of the repatriation programme. This entailed facilitating the return of those eligible to vote in time for the elections.

The operation depended crucially on the network of intelligence and support provided by Christian Care which had a track record of assistance before and during the war, giving them not only experience in operating under difficult and repressive circumstances, but also trust. In the late 1960s, it had coordinated welfare work in Southern Rhodesia. Its 'Relief Committee' had provided support for detainees and their families, and had been involved in drought relief, water supply and health services in the rural areas. The 'Prison Education Committee' had provided education and vocational training for detainees.

Despite being underfunded by the Rhodesian government, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare had a history of working



with the war displaced, and had been drawn into site-and-service schemes in the urban areas in collaboration with NGOs and church groups who often provided finance.

An independently financed programme for the estimated 0.75-1 million internally displaced who fell outside UNHCR's mandate ran parallel to the programme to assist refugees. This was run by the Heads of Denominations (HOD) Christian Care Refugee Committee and was funded by local churches and donations from broader based ecumenical groups. The programme for the internally displaced grew out of a pre-existing programme for the war displaced. This had started in an ad hoc way through church groups, public appeals and individual and company donations channelled through a number of local NGOs. By November 1979 (three months before the PF government was elected), a 'top priority' plan for war refugees' resettlement had been outlined marking the beginning of the 'back to the land' campaign.

In Phase One of the repatriation, a network of reception, urban transit and mission centres was established. The reception centres were mostly at or near the border entry points, and here returnees received medical check-ups, food, overnight accommodation, assistance in tracing their relatives by the ICRC and were registered by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

The network of mission stations in the countryside was heavily involved, and representatives of churches took on the responsibility for welcoming, counselling and briefing people on the situation in the country (or back home) before organizing their onward dispatch and transport to the nearest transit or mission centre.

To avoid congestion, returnees were rapidly decentralized from the transit centres to the missions. The mission centres acted as service and support satellites for the food aid (which lasted approximately a year) and other rehabilitation assistance. For many whose homes were destroyed these mission centres provided a critical base from which they could survive while reconstructing their homes. These same centres were used by the internally displaced.

In phase one, UNHCR officially repatriated 35,133 refugees in time for the elections (10,935 from Mozambique, 4,290 from Zambia and 19,908 from Botswana). During the same period a large number repatriated themselves. There are two documented examples, one involves 13,000 who walked from Mozambique into the Chipinge and Zambezi areas. Another group of 1,265 repatriated themselves in avoidance of official channels. In addition, the Christian Care network for the internally displaced handled many self-repatriated refugees - one source estimates 60,000 refugees came through these channels.

Phase Two started at the end of April. It was slower and better planned and focused on the young, including whole schools with teachers and equipment, ill people and war victims. A special camp for war-disabled was created and was manned by the Presbyterian Church with support from the Christian Care Office and the Government. In Phase One and Two together, approximately 70,000 refugees were officially repatriated out of the 150,000 - 200,000 in exile.

Phase Three involved handing over to the government, and the emphasis changed to rehabilitation. UNHCR prepared to hand over to UNDP. The government had established 19 district welfare offices to take over some of the functions of the ICRC. The ongoing food programme was in the hands of the Dept of Social Services (responsible for 31,000 recipients) and Christian Care dealt with another 55,000. 70,000 agricultural packages were distributed to those who formally repatriated. A parallel rural reconstruction programme for the displaced and other distributed a further 300,000 seed packs.

Extracted from 'Refugees Repatriation and Reconstruction: An Account of Zimbabwe's Post-Lancaster House Repatriations' by Jeremy Jackson, Centre of Applied Social Sciences, University of Zimbabwe.

A HAPPY HOMECOMING?

The repatriation of Zimbabwean refugees in 1980 took place after a dramatic change in the country of origin. Despite the optimism following the defeat of a colonial power, the return was less than a happy home coming for many who experienced it.

The Formal Repatriation

Refugee reception centres were nominally under the authority of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, plus a representative of UNHCR and Christian Care. The Rhodesian forces, however, exerted considerable control. As a result, there was an atmosphere of hostility, as well as outright harassment and frequent violence. Deliberate delaying tactics were used to prevent exiles returning in time for the election. Other attempts were made to prevent them voting, for example, the ages of some of the returnees were falsified in the documents issued by immigration officials in an attempt to make the returnees ineligible to vote.

On arrival at the centres, refugees were sometimes accused of being liberation fighters avoiding the assembly points, and there were cases of arrest and torture by the police. Buses that brought refugees from the reception centres to the transit centres were often rudely stopped and searched. The chairman of Christian Care at that time, Father Edward Rogers, described the reception centres as resembling army camps. Describing Teggwani centre, he observed:

'The centre was fenced by a high and heavy security fence. At the gate, there were policemen, with four district assistants who had FN rifles and one with a machine gun, whilst inside, armed District Assistants were very much in evidence'.

The extent of control by Rhodesian Security Forces was also described by CIIR reporting on the very first group of 1,000 who were repatriated from Botswana.

'On arrival of the refugees at the reception centre there was, apart from an army of newspaper reporters, a strong presence of armed District Assistants (DAs). Only 5 customs and immigration officials were present. Although it had been agreed by all parties concerned that a reception centre could process about 1000 refugees a day, on this particular day only 200 were processed. No refugees were, therefore, sent the next day. When the next 1000 arrived on the third day, the local authorities declared that no more could come as there was a water problem. The programme was therefore to be temporarily suspended. When another

convoy arrived on the fourth day, the Rhodesian authorities impounded the lorries and made it clear that any further arrivals would not be welcome'.

The Rhodesian authorities could dictate the pace of the repatriation exercise, and refugees felt that they were returning to a situation that had not changed greatly from the one they had fled. The initial stages of the repatriation exercise were in the hands of the same government that had fought against the guerrillas, so refugees were treated with the same resentment and suspicion as were the guerrillas in the assembly points.

The questioning that took place at the reception centres was alarming for returnees as it often took place in the presence of armed men. In addition, many of the questions were irrelevant for the purpose of repatriation, and were embarrassing and irritating. For example, returnees were asked about their occupation in the country of exile, the name of their previous employer in Rhodesia, the reasons for leaving the country and what political party they supported.

Self-repatriation

As a result of the delays, and out of suspicion, the majority of refugees chose to repatriate themselves. However, not even for these was the home coming problem-free. Those who did not use the designated reception centres were harassed by the police and security forces. Others were confronted by Muzorewa's auxiliaries in the countryside. Unlike other 'political armies', Muzorewa's auxiliaries had not been confined and were involved in propaganda for the UANC. Many returnees were arrested and detained in prisons for questioning on the grounds that they were trained combatants.

The return home was further complicated by the continued existence of 'protected villages' (PVs) in many parts of the rural areas. The details of their dismantling had not been discussed at Lancaster House, and their inmates continued to live under armed guard and experienced violence from the security forces even after the ceasefire. For returnees whose families, neighbours and friends were in the protected villages, it was not clear where they were supposed to go - to join their families, or to their previous home sites which had been destroyed by the Rhodesian forces.

Extracted from 'The Desire to Return: An Examination of the Effects of the Experiences of Zimbabwean Refugees in the Neighbouring Countries on Their Repatriation at the End of the Liberation War' by Stella Tendayi Makanya, School of Social Work, Harare, Zimbabwe.