

Bishops condemn police raid on South African church

CAPE TOWN, South Africa – The Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference condemned a police raid on a Johannesburg Methodist church that houses more than 1,300 refugees, mostly from Zimbabwe.

"We join Bishop Paul Verryn of the Methodist Church in decrying the violation of the status of the church as a place of sanctuary," the bishops said in a Feb. 1 statement after police were said to have assaulted refugees and destroyed their property in the early hours of Jan. 31.

The bishops said, "By providing shelter to the homeless, the stranger and the refugee, the church is carrying out the injunction of Jesus Christ."

The raid "was entirely inappropriate, uncalled for and an unwelcome manifestation of xenophobia," they said.

"Indeed, it is not how any human being should be treated by officials of a state committed to upholding human dignity," they said.

The bishops said Zimbabweans should be regarded as prima-facie refugees because, under the terms of the Organization of African Unity Refugee Convention, "they have left their home because of 'events seriously disturbing public order.'"

Since 2004 the church in Johannesburg has been a haven for Zimbabweans fleeing their country's economic meltdown.

Bishop Verryn said in a statement that police denied Methodist Church lawyers access to the 500 refugees taken into police custody. He said church officials feared those in the police station had insufficient food and water.

Noting that some refugees were released when their documents were found to be in order, Bishop Verryn said exiles and refugees in South Africa have great difficulty obtaining proper documentation.

He said that during the raid, in which officers stormed the church grounds with pepper spray and dogs, police officers “became the perpetrators of criminal action.”

In a Feb. 1 statement, the South African Council of Churches, of which the Catholic bishops’ conference is a member, said “church leaders were particularly disturbed to find that the action was taken without any attempt to engage the church, especially since church and municipal officials have for some time been exploring ways that they can cooperate to provide hospitality and services to refugees.”

A health center at the church “was vandalized and the staff on duty were detained,” the council statement said.

“In the apartheid era, we often were able to hide people in churches, because we knew that even the brutal apartheid police were reluctant to violate the sanctity of the church,” the general secretary of the council, Eddie Makue, said in the statement.

A Johannesburg police spokesman told IRIN, the U.N. news agency, that the church was not specifically targeted but was part of a larger operation in the area looking at illegally occupied buildings. He said the raid followed allegations that some of the church’s residents were involved in crime.

Bishop Verryn has filed complaints with the South African police oversight body regarding police behavior during and since the raid.