

Asylum seekers have to wait a year for an appointment in Port Elizabeth

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Asylum seekers in Port Elizabeth say they fear arrest because they do not have paperwork proving that they have applied for refugee status. This is because the Refugee Reception Office (RRO) is booking appointments for asylum seekers a year in advance.

When *GroundUp* visited the RRO in Sydenham on 6 August, applicants were being booked for 4 August 2020. The receipt is a small piece of paper with a handwritten reference number and the appointment date. Nothing on it indicates that it was issued by Home Affairs; there are no contact details and not even the name of the applicant.

Department of Home Affairs spokesperson David Hlabane said the RRO does its work diligently. He said it has a staff of eight officials. He blamed the backlog on asylum seekers failing to declare their intention to seek asylum at the port of entry. "The capacity we have in place [in Port Elizabeth] struggles to cope with high numbers exacerbated by those who bypass offices that were established for them in Musina and Pretoria," he said.

Secretary General for the Port Elizabeth-based Zimbabwe Migrants Support Network Shelton Chiyangwa said: "There are people getting dates for October 2020 ... We are very concerned as our people are still subjected to arrests even after they have made appointment dates."

Hlabane, however, said: "We are not aware of arrests of persons on the waiting list with receipts."

GroundUp spoke to a Zimbabwean man who works in Mthatha. He was booked for August 2020. "No police officer will accept such a piece of document as proof of staying in the country," he said.

A young Malawian man, who works in Mossel Bay and wants to be anonymous, was given an appointment in August 2020. "How am I to explain this to my employer because there is no official Home Affairs stamp and my name is not written on it? ... This is the end of my job ... I have been using my passport all along but it expired last week."

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