

Zimbabweans Living in the South African Border-Zone: Negotiating, Suffering, and Surviving

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Zimbabweans working, or seeking to work, on commercial farms and elsewhere in northern South Africa have sought out livelihoods and some form of security by negotiating precarious economic opportunities and the contingent enforcement of immigration rules in an atmosphere of generally hostile sentiments towards Zimbabweans in South Africa. They are doing so largely due to the continuing catastrophic unraveling of livelihoods, social services, and personal security for the majority of Zimbabweans in their own country as ZANU (PF) has unleashed terror in a vain attempt to hang onto power as the national economy implodes. Whereas the actual working and living conditions on the farms vary dramatically as some farmers, white and black, ruthlessly exploit the desperation of many of the Zimbabweans seeking work (HRW 2006, 2007, Rutherford and Addison 2007, Bloch 2008), much policy and activist energy is focused on the immigration processes and living conditions of all Zimbabweans in this zone. In this article, I aim to sketch out some of the pressing concerns of some of the Zimbabweans in this border-zone in light of the varied government and non-governmental interventions. As a way to introduce some of these issues, let me provide some examples from recent research carried out in Musina, the South African border town with Zimbabwe, and the surrounding farms in June 2008.

“We were just walking to work before 7 a.m. when the police came rushing up and those without ID cards went running to the bushes. A few of the women later claimed the police beat them. I didn’t have my ID and got picked up. I explained to the

police that I had it back in my room [in the farm compound], so I traveled with them as they were going to the other rooms of some of the other workers they picked up, looking for their ID cards. After some time, they just let me go as they said I was ‘talking well,’ as I was speaking in their language, Venda.” These rushed thoughts came from a Zimbabwean farm worker I call Garikayi during lunchtime on June 16th, 2008, outside an orange packshed on a farm hugging the south bank of the Limpopo River in northern Limpopo province. This farm was like every other farm in this commercial farming area around Musina as the majority of its workers were Zimbabwean. He was talking about an event as routinized in the lives of Zimbabweans working or seeking work on these northern South African farms, as was the soccer tournament that had been held on this same farm the day before, attracting teams of predominantly Zimbabwean farm workers from the nearby commercial farms.

Garikayi was elaborating what I had heard the hour before from the white South African farm manager and a neighbouring white farmer. They had been talking about corporate permits, a system introduced in 2005 to enable farmers anywhere in South Africa to legally recruit farm workers from Zimbabwe (HRW 2006:16-17). These two farmers opined that corporate permits worked generally well in terms of getting Zimbabwean workers. But, they continued, they still had problems with the police and others who enforced immigration laws recognizing that these Zimbabwean farm workers were legal and should not be harassed or deported.

The two farmers illustrated this problem by talking about the police raid on the farms in this border zone that day. The farm manager said the police came early in the morning thinking they would find the workers in the compound, not realizing everyone was working on this public holiday as the farms in the area were at the height of orange picking season. The police ended up intercepting the workers walking to work from the adjacent compound. The police picked up both

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Zimbabweans seeking work on the farm as well as Zimbabweans who were working on the farms even if they had IDs. When he realized that the raid had happened, the farm manager had one of his Zimbabwean office clerks print out all the IDs and the corporate permits for his workers and drove to the army camp where those detained were being processed before being deported. As he put it, “luckily the police superintendent was someone who listened and one could negotiate with and we got them back.”

From the farm manager’s perspective, the “negotiations” entailed reminding the police about the rules they had worked out with farmers in this border-zone concerning farm-issued IDs. According to the farmers and some police officers I met, farmers could create and issue IDs to the Zimbabweans they had brought over on corporate permits and have them carry these documents for purposes of identification. The farmers pushed for this rule, for a number were concerned about giving the official immigration documents to the Zimbabwean workers themselves in case, in the words of the neighbouring farmer, “they leave with these corporate permit documents in the hope of finding work elsewhere.” The farm manager thus had to negotiate with the police superintendent to free those Zimbabweans who had either been carrying their farm-issued IDs with them, or in some cases the farmer brought their IDs with him to the camp. The farm manager was successful in freeing his workers from the camp. Prior to the introduction of corporate permits, these farm-issued IDs often worked as a recognizable legitimate document for police, soldiers and Home Affairs officials who patrol the border region, even though the Zimbabwean workers who were carrying these farmer-created cards had no legal documents authorizing their presence in South Africa (Rutherford forthcoming).

Zimbabweans like Garikayi and farmers at times have room to negotiate with the authorities enforcing immigration rules to be able to stay in South Africa, as they either draw on some

demonstration that these particular Zimbabweans belong to South Africa, the farms, or the border-zone or they pay a bribe (e.g., HRW 2007:68). Yet, there are definitely many situations that these Zimbabwean face that have very little room for negotiation, particularly in crossing the border itself.

The vast majority of Zimbabweans entering into South Africa do so through undocumented means, typically traversing the Limpopo River and making their way through the rows of fences with a wire cutter or using pre-existing holes into South Africa. Even some of the Zimbabweans who work with a corporate permit tend to “jump” the border to avoid line-ups and potentially corrupt officials at the Beitbridge border-crossing. But there are significant risks involved.

One entails drowning. Although for the most part of the year the Limpopo River has many dry patches which make it easy to walk over, during the short rainy season starting in November or so the river can be high and treacherous. As Christmas falls in this period, which is often a time when many Zimbabweans working in South Africa seek to return home during the vacation break before returning to their South African job (e.g., IRIN 2008), there often are many more Zimbabweans crossing the river.

One Zimbabwean farm worker friend whom I call Dumisani, who has worked as a lower management worker on another South African farm hugging the south bank of the Limpopo River since 2002. He, told me in June 2008 that the 2007-2008 rainy season was deadly for Zimbabweans. “The water was very dangerous this year,” he informed me. “And with even more Zimbabweans crossing into South Africa because of the mess of our country, many, many Zimbabweans died.” He then related stories of his own perilous crossing at Christmas time and all the stories circulating amongst the workers in the compound about signs of the toll the Limpopo River took on Zimbabweans. “Some people from the farm found a dead baby lying on

the Zimbabwe side of the river. It was getting late so they just left it there. Others found pieces of human flesh on the river bank. Eeee, many died in the river this past year and no one knows what happened to them as their bodies aren't recovered. They aren't given a proper burial," he sighed shaking his head. He continued, "I and a number of others saw a body going round and round in a whirlpool just off the farm property. We phoned the police to retrieve it but by the time they arrived the body had been swept away by the current...."

Rivaling in both the frequency and grisliness of the recounting of the grim tales of drownings and body parts were narratives about personal harm and suffering at the hands of humans, not water. These were accounts of attacks by the *maguma-guma*, a term that translates as people who seek to make a living through dubious means. Zimbabweans who first jumped the border before 2000-2001 have told me that there were no *maguma-guma* operating along the Limpopo River. Before then there are accounts of that term being used to describe men in Beitbridge who were involved in coercively muscling into certain markets, using violence and threats, for example, to force mopane worm sellers to sell them their harvests at a reduced price which the *maguma-guma* sold for a profit, including smuggling the regional delicacy into South Africa (Kozanayi and Frost 2002:8, inter alia). But by 2004 when I first began to do research in this border-zone, the *maguma-guma* were an established presence on the Zimbabwean side of the Limpopo River. Whereas they still practice smuggling across the border, including leading border-jumpers into South Africa (Irish 2005, Vigneswaran 2008:14-15), they are more widely known for preying on the border-crossers, robbing, beating, raping, and at times killing their victims (e.g., FMSP and MLAO 2007:10, HRW 2008:103). For many first time border-jumpers, attacks by the *maguma-guma* presaged further suffering in South Africa.

During my research in 2004 and 2005, Zimbabwean farm workers in northern Limpopo had many tales of being chased and attacked by *maguma-guma*,

particularly when they first jumped the border and they were not yet aware of the menacing presence of the attackers. At that time, these men operated in gangs solely along the Zimbabwean side of the border. During this period, farm workers told me about occasional abuse they faced in South Africa from soldiers, police, Home Affairs officials or farmers but they experienced no *maguma-guma* moving around south of the Limpopo River. By 2008, I learned the situation had changed as the *maguma-guma* were also operating on the South African side of the border.

In June 2008, I met a number of Zimbabweans living in the bushes outside of Musina, having crossed into South Africa the day or a few days before. They talked about encounters and stories of *maguma-guma* operating along the railway line from the border into Musina and other pathways Zimbabweans take and attacking the border-jumpers. Some of these *maguma-guma* active in South Africa were said to be Zimbabweans residing in South Africa as well as South Africans. Regardless of their nationality, it meant one more risk Zimbabwean migrants had to navigate as they sought some form of security and livelihood for themselves and typically their dependents awaiting back in Zimbabwe for their return as well as any remittances.

During this recent trip, I learned that there were many more recent arrivals from Zimbabwe living precariously around Musina compared to previous years. Many were fleeing the increased violence connected to the run-off to the presidential election (e.g., SPT 2008, ZHRNF 2008). I met women who said their husbands were kidnapped because they had campaigned for the MDC and young men who fled because groups of young men were press-ganging youth into joining them to terrorize MDC supporters. Others fled because they and their dependents were starving and there were minimal or non-existent livelihood strategies available to them back in Zimbabwe. But their options were not too bountiful in South Africa.

Whereas many of those who were living in the bushes on commercial farms were often seeking work on these farms, even if only on a temporary basis, many of those near Musina were biding their time until the road blocks and police sweeps decreased so they could continue their voyage further south into South Africa to the larger urban centers. In the meantime they were engaged in often highly exploitive activities to try to survive.

For instance, some of Zimbabweans living on the outskirts of Musina said they spent their days cutting wood for township residents (be they South African or Zimbabweans who have lived there for some time), doing two to three wheelbarrows of cut wood in a day in exchange for a plate of pap (called sadza in Zimbabwe, a thick maize-meal porridge that is the staple in the region). Others worked for some men to scour the long-closed copper mine in Musina itself, seeking metal scraps at night in exchange for a few Rand. A few were able to find temporary work on construction sites which have emerged throughout Musina as this border town has benefitted from an expanded retail trade as Zimbabweans with money legally cross the border to buy goods and food for re-sale back in their commodity-scarce country (IRIN 2007).

For the majority of the newly arrived Zimbabweans they were living a desperate life surviving by entering into exploitive practices and if possible receiving the charity of others. In terms of the latter, earlier in 2008 the Catholic Church in Nancefield township of Musina began providing monthly food relief to recent Zimbabwean arrivals. Medicins Sans Frontières (MSF) began providing emergency health care in late 2007 for Zimbabweans seeking refuge in South Africa, both in the farming areas and Musina township of the border-zone as well as in central Johannesburg. They complement long-term work by Save the Children (UK) working with child migrants from Zimbabwe living in Musina (e.g., Peta 2007, SC 2007).

Such targeting of Zimbabweans reportedly caused some concerns of South Africans in Musina who resented resources going to these recent arrivals from Zimbabwe, but on the whole most people confirmed that there was no widespread hostility towards Zimbabweans in this border-zone, perhaps reflecting the long history of migration of Zimbabweans to this region. In fact, during the xenophobic attacks on “foreigners” in other parts of South Africa in May 2008, notably in Gauteng province and Cape Town, there were no recorded instances of similar attacks in Musina or the surrounding area. Instead, Zimbabweans have had to contend with the varied, often hostile state practices directed against them.

Several Musina residents and Zimbabwean recent arrivals told me that there were so many roadblocks set up in this border-zone and points further south in June 2008 as the South African authorities had expected more Zimbabweans to cross the border given the increased political violence in the run-up to the Zimbabwean presidential run-off election at the end of the month as well as the deepening economic meltdown in Zimbabwe. Despite such documented hardships and persecution many Zimbabweans have faced, the aim of South African authorities has still largely been to detain and deport such “illegals” (SPT 2004, RI 2004, 2007, Vigneswaran 2008, Bloch 2008:15). As the Director General of the South African Department of Home Affairs declared in August 2007, he personally thought Zimbabweans were “economic migrants” and not refugees (cited in Roelf 2007). In July 2008, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR 2008) decried that in the previous forty days – during the height of the electoral violence – South Africa deported 17,000 Zimbabweans and had granted asylum to only 500 of the 35,000 Zimbabweans who formally applied for refugee status even as the international agency requested the cessation of such deportations.

This skeptical if not antagonistic sentiment towards Zimbabweans was very apparent in June 2008 when I came across a number of examples of South

African authorities being resistant to recognizing Zimbabweans as legitimate asylum-seekers, let alone welcomed workers through the corporate work permit system. Zimbabweans caught by immigration enforcement authorities were still being regularly repatriated without trying to discern if there were asylum-seekers. As Darshan Vigneswaran (2008:11) observed, based on his ethnographic study of border officials in this border-zone, "officials on the South African side of the border-post often act outside of their legal obligations in order to ensure that South African borders are defended against Zimbabwean migration flows."

Several activists in Musina told me about cases of Zimbabweans who had refugee papers or sought to claim asylum being deported as well. Given the reporting of such cases and calls upon the South African government to rethink its policies towards Zimbabwean migrants (e.g., FMSP 2007, RI 2007, MSF 2008, UNHCR 2008), groups such as the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) were in the process of setting up permanent offices in Musina in June 2008, joining the local Musina Legal Advice Office in advocating for the implementation of South African laws concerning asylum. The government was also just establishing a Refugee Reception Centre where asylum seekers could register rather than trying to make their way to Guateng province over 400 kilometers away which they have had to do. A temporary reception centre was opened in early July 2008 and granted nearly 2000 temporary asylum permits to asylum seekers (not only Zimbabweans) by the end of the month (SABC 2008).

Echoing Vigneswaran's observation above, I also heard a number of accounts from farmers and others who work on immigration issues that some South African border-control agents and police officials were antagonistic towards all Zimbabweans, including those who were on corporate permits. Some talked about unnecessary delays in processing the paperwork at the border to outright refusals to do so as well as the constant harassment by police

of workers at the farms, such as raids that pick up Zimbabweans with permits as well as those without.

One strategy being put forward by the IOM office in Zimbabwe to minimize such problems is to establish a more formal labour recruitment scheme for South African farmers. The aim of this proposed pilot project is to produce a safe and legal temporary migration of Zimbabweans to Limpopo province farms. This plan has been worked on since 2001 after South African authorities threatened to deport all Zimbabweans working on the farms around Musina (SABC 2001; see, e.g., HRW 2006:15, IOM 2008:14). Although still a draft, the plan envisages a pilot project through which Zimbabweans from districts with a history of working on the border-zone South African farms are vetted by Zimbabwean authorities for their health conditions and criminal records. They then would send the details of the vetted applicants to the IOM Reception and Support Centre in Beitbridge for selection by the few commercial farmers from Limpopo province in the pilot project. As the corporate permit applications are being processed, IOM would educate the recruits about being a migrant farm worker in South Africa and a special passport would be given to those workers. Given the difficulty of acquiring a Zimbabwean passport these days due to, amongst other reasons severe budget limitations, most Zimbabweans working as a farm worker in South Africa on a corporate permit receive an Emergency Travel Document from Zimbabwean authorities in lieu of a passport. This pilot project would find resources for the Zimbabwean Ministry of Home Affairs to create a special passport for farm workers.

There is a bilateral stakeholder group assessing this draft program comprised of South African and Zimbabwean government officials, IOM staff, and South African farmers, albeit in June 2008 there were no trade union representatives from South Africa or Zimbabwe in this group. Nor was there anyone representing the well-over ten thousand Zimbabwean farm workers themselves living in the commercial farming area hugging the Limpopo

River (Rutherford and Addison 2007). There were still a number of issues to be decided – including what to do with the existing Zimbabweans currently working as seasonal or permanent workers on the borderzone farms themselves who would not have gone through this process to find their job, the actual ability of Zimbabwean government departments to administer this project given the deep hemorrhaging of staff and resources during this protracted economic crisis, and the highly pertinent concerns of politicization of the process, particularly with a large number of youths trained and used for terror purposes by ZANU (PF) with minimal job prospects outside of electoral contests, despite promises made to them by their ruling party trainers (e.g., SPT 2003, Moyo 2008). There are also questions about whether this will necessarily ensure the normalization of labour recruitment as the ever-worsening meltdown in Zimbabwe all but guarantees that there will still be large numbers of Zimbabweans seeking work in South Africa, including on these farms, despite the existence of formal labour recruiting channels.

Although there is a deep history of interaction and networks between people on both sides of the border, the unrelenting crisis in Zimbabwe since 2000 has led to an unprecedented number of Zimbabweans crossing the border and residing in Limpopo province. As more and more Zimbabweans suffer and seek to survive in northern South Africa, there is increasing public attention on them. Along with the international and national agencies, state institutions, and non-governmental organizations, there are also many more researchers active in this region. Largely based in key South African research centres like the Forced Migration Studies Programme at the University of Witwatersrand and PLAAS (Institute of Land, Poverty and Agrarian Studies) at the University of Western Cape, these Zimbabwean, South African, European and North American researchers are seeking to learn more about Zimbabweans working, seeking work, or passing through the commercial farms, the townships, the mines, the parks and the former homelands in northern South Africa. The

aim of much of this scholarship is to better understand their strategies, hopes, circumstances, possibilities and perils – to the forms of negotiation, suffering and survival of these Zimbabweans living in this South African border-zone – to contribute to the ever-developing frameworks of analysis and interventions by state and non-state agencies and activists. It is with this aim that I have modestly directed this article.

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