



Photo: G. Marnovich

The emigration from Zimbabwe into the north of South Africa is certainly the largest peace-time exodus from a single country.

This mass exodus had dramatic consequences for food production in Zimbabwe, beyond the fact that the country can no longer feed itself. The agricultural sector, which had been partially mechanised, now lay in ruins. Around 1.5 million people were forced to seek their fortunes in South Africa. This had devastating consequences for part of the neighbouring country: the area between the towns of Louis Trichard and Messina in the province of Limpopo was also mainly agricultural. So many Zimbabweans have now settled there that the South African residents feel like foreigners in their own country.

Zimbabwean migrants destabilise the north of South Africa

The sheer number of refugees from Zimbabwe puts a heavy burden on the province of Limpopo in South Africa. These new arrivals strain the already weak structure of the local labour market. The result is frustration and bitterness for local people.

Although no precise figures are available for the number of Zimbabwean refugees to emigrate since 2001, this is certainly the world's largest peace-time exodus from a single country. It has been estimated that around 3 million people have left Zimbabwe since

President Robert Mugabe confiscated white-owned farms around ten years ago at the start of an unparalleled economic meltdown. The majority of refugees continue to flee to South Africa, as it is relatively easy to reach and has a much higher standard of living than Zimbabwe. The exodus peaked in 2007 and 2008, when up to 3,000 Zimbabweans fled to South Africa via the Beitbridge border crossing every day on tourist visas, and an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 illegally crossed the Limpopo River which forms the border.

Thomas Scheen

Correspondent
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
Johannesburg, South Africa
t.scheen@faz.de

■ Zimbabwean refugees work at any price

Following xenophobic clashes in South African cities in 2008, increasing numbers of Zimbabwean refugees now move to the countryside instead of cities such as Johannesburg. Surrounding the town of Messina, which otherwise has a weak economy, are large citrus and cotton plantations. For their owners – all white – the primary consequence of this shift in migration patterns is the availability of cheap labour. They have a huge labour pool to draw on. Farmers report that up to 100 people approach them for work each day, and are prepared to work for next to nothing. The farmers supply them with South African work permits, and somehow even procure Zimbabwean exit documentation for illegal immigrants. Against this cheap competition, South African farm labourers do not stand a chance. It is true that Zimbabweans used to come and help with the harvest. Yet never before have these workers settled permanently in South Africa, even

when harvest is over and they have no realistic prospect of earning further income.

■ Increasing conflict – even in rural areas

Messina now resembles the front line in this undeclared exodus from Zimbabwe. Serious attacks have been committed by Zimbabweans in the area, including two cases of murder in the course of robbery. Messina's white farmers now seek out poor Zimbabweans, patrol the streets at night and call for detention camps. It is one of the many ironies to spring up along this border that the very same farmers effectively expelled South Africans from their farms through labour price erosion.

Messina's Boer vigilantes are just one of the most visible and clumsy expressions of a widespread, deep-seated dissatisfaction with the "Zim tsunami", as the South African newspapers have dubbed the wave of immigration. For a time, the South African Army was ordered to collect refugees in the border area and transport them back to Zimbabwe. However, this was unsuccessful as soldiers became the first people to earn money from the refugees, by opening the border fence and demanding an "entrance fee".

The immediate consequence of the situation has been huge tension

The migrants from Zimbabwe are cheap workers on the commercial farms in South Africa.

At peak times, around 3,000 Zimbabweans fled to South Africa via the Beitbridge border every day.

between black South Africans and the new arrivals. This was already familiar in the cities, but new to the countryside. Despite the explosive situation, the South African government stubbornly refuses to establish refugee camps for Zimbabweans, as this would be tantamount to Pretoria admitting something was very rotten in the state of Zimbabwe, run by its "Comrade Bob". In the South African government's view, refugees should "integrate" into black South African communities. However, even without the influx of Zimbabweans onto the labour market, unemployment in rural South Africa has long exceeded 50 percent.



Photo: G. Marinovich



Photo: laif

Zusammenfassung

Die große Zahl an Flüchtlingen aus Simbabwe, die seit 2001 in den Norden Südafrikas strömen, ist eine schwere Bürde für die Region. Frust und Verbitterung wachsen bei den Einheimischen. Seit den schweren Zusammenstößen in Johannesburg ziehen es viele Flüchtlinge vor, in den ländlichen Gebieten zu bleiben. Für die weißen Farmer sind die Migranten aus Simbabwe billige Arbeitskräfte, für die ohnehin große Zahl arbeitsloser Landarbeiter sind sie eine Bedro-

hung. Die Folge sind wachsende Konflikte, so dass die südafrikanische Bevölkerung Internierungslager für die Migranten aus dem nördlichen Nachbarland fordert.

Resumen

Los refugiados de Zimbabue que invaden en grandes cantidades el norte de Sudáfrica desde 2001 se han convertido en una pesada carga para la región. La población local es presa de un creciente sentido de frustración y resentimiento. Desde los

graves enfrentamientos en Johannesburgo, muchos refugiados prefieren permanecer en las áreas rurales. Para los agricultores blancos constituyen mano de obra barata, pero para el número de por sí alto de peones agrícolas desempleados, los emigrantes de Zimbabue constituyen una amenaza. Como consecuencia surgen crecientes conflictos, por lo cual la población sudafricana viene exigiendo que se establezca un campo de internamiento para los migrantes del país vecino del norte.