



## Immigration and asylum

# Legal bids mean UK deportation flight to Zimbabwe takes off just one-third full

**Diane Taylor**

Wed 21 Jul 2021 19:21 EDT

A controversial [Home Office deportation charter flight to Zimbabwe](#) took off at about 10.30pm on Wednesday evening with only around one-third of the passengers on board that officials had hoped to remove.

It is the first mass deportation flight to [Zimbabwe](#) for many years and marks the start of a planned ‘summer season’ of charter flight deportations to countries including Vietnam and Jamaica that the Home Office is planning in the coming weeks.

The flight was due to deport about 50 people but only 14 are believed to have been on board when it took off from Stansted. It presented the Home Office with a series of problems, with dozens of escorts self-isolating until later this week due to being exposed to colleagues with Covid. Home Office officials confirmed on Tuesday evening that there is an outbreak of Covid at Brook House near Gatwick. Some of the Zimbabweans at that detention centre due to be deported could not be removed due to the outbreak.

There were also multiple legal challenges due to concerns about the safety of returnees in Zimbabwe, a country with a poor human rights record. Some of those earmarked for return

have spent decades in the UK, have families here and were politically active against the Mugabe regime.

The Home Office says that many had committed serious crimes but some interviewed by the Guardian had committed less serious offences such as driving offences or working with false documents.

Seventy five parliamentarians signed a letter drafted by the all party parliamentary group on Zimbabwe, raising concerns about what they say is a deteriorating political and human rights situation in the country.

In a letter to the home secretary they wrote: “The Zimbabwe government is systematically oppressing its political opponents, denying freedom of speech and committing gross human rights violations.”

Hours before the flight was due to take off two detainees due to board it threw themselves from a second floor landing at Colnbrook immigration removal centre on to netting below. They are believed to have been unharmed and were not removed.

An emergency out of hours high court challenge by Duncan Lewis solicitors to halt the whole flight did not succeed. However, the judge, Justice Steyn, accepted that anyone on the flight given face to face interviews with Zimbabwean officials before being issued with an emergency travel document required to enter Zimbabwe could be at risk on return.

She granted an order preventing the individual who brought the case from boarding the flight but left it to others on the flight to make their own individual applications. By the time news of the high court order was made public it was not possible to communicate it to all of those who may have been able to benefit from it as they were en route to the flight with their phones confiscated.

Bella Sankey, director of the charity Detention Action, said: “The high court’s landmark intervention rightly recognises the real risk of appalling human rights violations when the Home Office allows the Zimbabwean government to question those it seeks to expel. But how horrifying that others subjected to the same practice may have been loaded on to the plane, unable to hear about this judgment or use the precedent to prevent their own removal.”

A Home Office spokesperson said: “Foreign criminals who abuse our hospitality should be in no doubt of our determination to deport them. Any foreign national who is convicted of a crime and given a prison sentence is considered for deportation at the earliest opportunity.”