

Home Office to deport Zimbabwean family who fled Mugabe's regime

Woman whose husband was killed for his links to the opposition has claim for asylum rejected after eight years in UK

By Jane Merrick and Emily Dugan

A Zimbabwean woman and her two daughters who fled the Mugabe regime are to be deported from Britain despite promises by the Government to protect the country's citizens.

Privilege Thulambo, 39, whose husband was murdered by Robert Mugabe's men, and her children are being detained in a controversial immigration centre after being seized by immigration officers on Friday.

Friends of the family said the Home Office would be guilty of "murder by the back door" by deporting the three women. They are all Zimbabwean nationals, but because they entered the UK on Malawian passports – the only way they could escape the Mugabe regime – eight years ago, they have had their claims for asylum rejected.

After spending Christmas in the grim surroundings of the Yarl's Wood detention centre, they will be forced on to a flight to Malawi on 29 December. Because of their Zimbabwean nationality they are likely to be immediately sent to their home country, where they face torture or death.

They are in this desperate situation despite UK government policy that no Zimbabwean nationals will be sent back there unless they are members of the ruling Zanu-PF party.

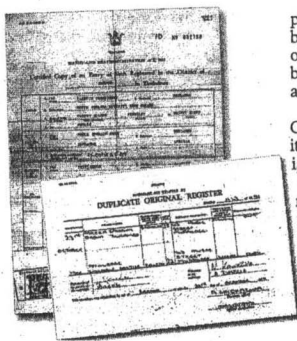
It follows criticism last week of the Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, who warned cabinet colleagues of an "influx" of Zimbabwean refugees fleeing the cholera outbreak.

Mrs Thulambo and her daughters Valerie, 20, and Lorraine, 18, have spent eight years in the UK. Mrs Thulambo's Cambridge-educated husband, Macca, was killed for his links to opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai. His widow tried to leave Zimbabwe but was arrested at the airport, and later tortured and raped.

She and her daughters fled to neighbouring Malawi, where they obtained



Privilege Thulambo, centre, and her daughters Valerie and Lorraine. Below, Mrs Thulambo's birth and marriage certificates



passports because of her late husband's dual nationality. Immigration officials seized Mrs Thulambo's Zimbabwean passport during their arrest at dawn on Friday.

The Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, the family's former MP, said it was wrong to assess them as Malawian for immigration purposes.

He added: "It is time this Government gets tough on Mugabe, not his victims. This case illustrates the heartless approach from a Home Office more willing to deport people to their fate rather than do the right thing. Taking such a legalistic approach to Privilege and her daughters shows that the Home

Office is seeking to find any excuse or loophole to deport Zimbabwean nationals."

Mrs Thulambo is an active member of her local church, St Mark's, in Crookes, Sheffield. Valerie was looking forward to studying law at university after passing her A-levels, friends said. According to Kirsten Heywood, a family friend: "As soon as they arrive in Malawi they will be sent back to Zimbabwe – which means death. It is terrible what the Home Office is doing. This is back-door murder."

In a letter to the Home Secretary, Mr Clegg said: "I have met Mrs Thulambo on several occasions. She has suffered severe mental and physical

health problems after the persecution she and her family suffered in Zimbabwe. She has become a respected and well-liked member of the community; her daughters attended the local schools and have integrated into society and have many friends.

"I believe this is a clear-cut case for the Home Office to demonstrate clemency and leniency on Mrs Thulambo's case and on others like her."

The Home Office yesterday declined to comment on individual cases, but added: "We only seek to remove families who are in the UK unlawfully after all appeal rights have been used and the courts agree that they have no further right to remain in the UK."

"Once all appeal rights are exhausted, we would much rather that those here illegally left voluntarily. Sadly, some families choose not to do so even though they are given every opportunity to leave voluntarily. We then have a duty to enforce the law."

Meanwhile, a landmark ruling has given hope to thousands of impoverished asylum-seekers, including those from Zimbabwe, who are barred from working while the Home Office resolves their cases. The Government's refusal to allow those who are trapped in the system for long periods to seek employment has been branded unlawful by the High Court.

According to current estimates, up to 280,000 refused asylum-seekers in the UK are forced into destitution – often for years – as they wait for their cases to be processed. Now the blanket policy that bars employment for those stuck in the Home Office backlog has been declared illegal under human rights legislation.

The Government has pledged to process its backlog of several hundred thousand cases by 2011, but for many this could mean facing a life of poverty for up to a decade with no hope of a job.