



UNHCR welcomes New Zealand Government's move to grant residence to Zimbabwean nationals

UNHCR today welcomed the New Zealand Government's decision to offer residence status to certain Zimbabwean nationals who cannot return to their country, regardless of their HIV/AIDS status.

UNHCR's Regional Representative Mr. Neill Wright said the move, building on the Government's 2005 Special Zimbabwe Residence Policy (SRP), was consistent with UNHCR's policy on non-discrimination with regard to people with HIV/AIDS, and with broader human rights principles.

"The move makes sense not only from a public health standpoint -- to proactively manage a caseload that may require treatment -- but also from a human rights point of view," he said.

"UNHCR's position is that refugees, internally displaced people and others of concern to the agency living with HIV/AIDS should not be subject to discriminatory measures, and that they should have access to appropriate health care.

"Given the SRP is intended to apply to people in refugee-like situations who cannot return to Zimbabwe, I welcome a policy that incorporates the principles of non-discrimination and practical strategies to provide treatment," said Mr Wright.

Since May 2002, UNHCR's position has been that unsuccessful asylum-seekers should not be forcibly returned to Zimbabwe given the ongoing political situation.

"The Special Zimbabwe Residence Policy (SRP) introduced by New Zealand in 2005 was a welcome response to the humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe, complementing the options of seeking asylum and refugee resettlement," said Mr Wright.

"The latest moves to ensure the residence offer under the SRP can be taken up by those it's intended to assist (regardless of their health status) further strengthens the integrity and effectiveness of New Zealand's broader humanitarian and refugee programme.

“Obtaining permanent residence is an important step towards attaining citizenship, and allowing displaced people to rebuild their lives,” said Mr Wright.

Under the SRP, Zimbabwean nationals who arrived in New Zealand on or before 23 September 2004 (and are not eligible under other residence policies) can apply for permanent residence before 28 February 2007. About 500 people have applied for residence under the policy to date. The Government of New Zealand believes that a significant number of other eligible candidates have not come forward because of uncertainty around their HIV status, following a policy change requiring mandatory HIV screening before consideration of residence applications. The Government of New Zealand estimates that a further 800 Zimbabweans in New Zealand could be eligible under the SRP scheme.
