

# Commemoration Statement on the One-Year Anniversary of the Brutal Refugee Relocation Exercise

*Lilongwe, 20 May 2024*

This week, we solemnly mark one year since the enforcement of a brutal refugee relocation exercise by the Malawian Government, a dark chapter in our nation's history that has inflicted profound suffering on vulnerable communities. On 17 May 2023, the lives of countless refugees and asylum seekers were upended as state authorities executed a series of forcible relocations characterized by severe human rights violations and a glaring lack of accountability. As of October 9, 2023, 765 families, totaling 2,296 refugees and asylum seekers, were forcibly moved to Dzaleka Camp, which currently holds about 53,000 refugees despite its initial capacity of 12,000 when established in 1994. The relocation followed a directive issued by the Government on 27 March 2023 to enforce its retrogressive encampment policy.

## **Human Rights Violations**

Several local and international organisations have vividly documented the egregious abuses committed during this period. Refugees and asylum seekers, including women and children, faced harrowing acts of violence such as rape, arbitrary detention, and the destruction and theft of property. Families were torn apart, livelihoods were obliterated, and many were left to languish in overcrowded and under-resourced facilities at Dzaleka Refugee Camp. The trauma and loss endured by these individuals are a stark reminder of the urgent need for justice and reform.

## **Failure to Prosecute Offenders**

The failure to prosecute the perpetrators of these crimes further compounds the injustice. Notably, suspects involved in the Salima robbery have yet to face prosecution, reflecting a troubling pattern of impunity. This lack of accountability undermines the rule of law and perpetuates a climate of fear and insecurity among the refugee community.

## **Lack of Transparency**

Equally disturbing is the government's failure to make public the report on the confiscation and forced opening of containers belonging to refugees. This opacity not only violates the principles of transparency and accountability but also denies the victims the opportunity for restitution and justice.

## **Humanitarian Crisis**

The forced relocations have exacerbated an already dire humanitarian crisis at Dzaleka Refugee Camp. The camp, is now overwhelmed with over 53,000 residents, leading to severe shortages of water, food, shelter, and sanitation. This congestion has created an untenable situation, with refugees living in deplorable conditions that threaten their health and dignity. We specially recall the voice of Valentin Tapsoba, Director of UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Southern Africa who made a clarion call to the authorities to "rescind relocation decision as the existing structures in Dzaleka Refugee Camp are already stretched to the limit and cannot accommodate more refugees in a dignified manner", "This will result in immense human suffering and create a new dependency on humanitarian assistance."

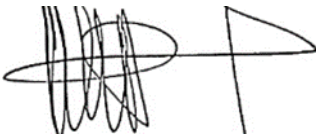
**Suspicious extraditions/deportations:** There are reports of illegal extraditions and deportations during the relocation exercise raising concerns of injustice, rule of law, transparency and accountability by the authorities.

## **Call to Action:**

In light of these grave concerns, we call for immediate and decisive action by government and stakeholders to address the ongoing plight of refugees in Malawi:

1. **Independent Investigations:** Malawi Human Rights Commission (MHRC) to conduct an urgent, independent investigation into human rights violations during the relocation exercise. Further, the Independent Complaints Commission (ICC) to expedite urgent, independent investigation into the conduct of the Malawi Police involved in these operations.
2. **Prosecution of Perpetrators:** Malawi Police Service to arrest and prosecute police officers and civilians involved in the persecution of refugees and the theft of their property.
3. **Humanitarian Support:** Ensure continued support to the permanent resident refugees in Dzaleka Refugee Camp, and consider providing temporary permits for those without criminal history to return to their previous lives and support themselves.
4. **Halt Extraditions:** Cease the forcible extradition of refugees to countries where they risk persecution, particularly Rwanda.
5. **Report on confiscated goods and properties:** Ministry of Homeland Security to urgently release the report on the forced opening of the confiscated containers and sales of goods belonging to refugee businesses.
6. **Legislative Reform:** Ministry of Finance to timely and adequately fund the Malawi Law Commission to expedite the review of the Refugees Act to align it with international standards, ensuring the protection of refugees' fundamental rights.
7. **Upholding the CRRF commitments:** We further urge authorities to demonstrate commitment to the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and pledges Malawi made at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019 to incorporate refugee matters into its national development agenda, reform the legal and policy framework, cover registration and documentation of refugees, enhance refugee status determination and support the self-reliance of refugees through increased livelihood activities
8. **Public Awareness:** CSOs and development partners to support campaigns to raise public awareness about the plight of refugees, fostering empathy and understanding among the local population.

As we reflect on the past year, let us recommit to upholding the principles of human rights and justice. The suffering endured by the refugees and asylum seekers in Malawi is a stark reminder of our collective responsibility to protect the most vulnerable among us. We stand in solidarity with these communities and pledge to continue advocating for their rights and dignity.



Charles Kajoloweka  
Executive Director  
Youth and Society (YAS)

**On behalf of:**

Youth and Society (YAS)  
CHREAA  
INUA Advocacy  
Civil Society Coalition on Migration (CCM)  
Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC)  
Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (CHRR)  
Church and Society – Livingstonia Synod  
Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace  
Centre for Democracy and Economic Development Initiative (CDEDI)  
Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC)  
National Advocacy Platform (NAP)  
Citizen Alliance (CA)  
Ukhondo Services Foundation (USEF)