

[Home](#) > Plea by Andrew Feinstein to Mayor Helen Zille

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By *moderator*

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I watched from a distance as the xenophobic violence unfolded in South Africa. At first, I was ashamed - Is this what our young democracy has become? My shame evolved to anger as the utter lack of leadership and inadequate government response further exacerbated the situation. However, amid these feelings of disgust, I also felt pride and admiration towards those proactive organizations who worked to alleviate the suffering of displaced peoples. The Jewish community and TAC paid for a group of around 140 refugees to stay at the train lodge until yesterday, when they ran out of funds. The mosque on Tennyson Street opened its doors to more than 180 refugees. Old TAC offices have been converted to refugee camps, and hundreds are staying in Methodist Churches around the city.

I recently met with some of the refugee leaders. One man, an erudite journalist by training, said to me with tears in his eyes, "We just want to be treated like human beings."

And so, last night, as I slept in my warm comfortable bed and heard the rain lashing down, I thought of this man and the 140 others who were sleeping without shelter amidst the storm outside Caledon Square police station. The dreary, miserable weather compounded with the utter political injustice of the situation reminded me of the Crossroads crisis of the mid 80's. But, we are now a democracy, and we must call upon our leaders to be accountable. The pathetic games between the province and the city must cease and they must work together to resolve the crisis. Only then can we ensure that our fellow Africans are given shelter, adequate food, protection, and a future where they want to be. Only then can we ensure human dignity for our brethren.

Currently, it is crucial that the mayor of Cape Town immediately open civic centers and community halls in the more secure, white, areas of Cape Town. This includes the Sea Point Civic Center, halls in the Cape Town Civic Centre, halls in the Good Hope Centre, community halls and public facilities in Woodstock and Salt River, and Muizenberg Civic Centre. Yes, this will come as an inconvenience for disrupted weddings, parties and other community events. But, given the anguish, distress and death suffered by our fellow Africans, surely we can burden this nuisance. In addition, events scheduled to take place in these venues could be moved to school halls. For example, Weizmann School in Sea Point has already volunteered to assist with this.

Madam Mayor, there are more than 8,700 people still displaced in the Cape Town metropolitan area. Failure to immediately open these halls and centers will see you judged not only by the caring people of this city and country, but by history as well. Do the only humane thing, the only civilized thing, and open these venues now, before these people have to spend another night in the rain, another day hungry, another hour treated as less than human beings.

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