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Zimbabwe: The National Youth Service (NYS) training program; the type of training involved; age of participants; whether the training program is mandatory; whether there are exemptions; and the penalty for refusing to serve or for desertion (2001 - 2006)

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National Youth Service (NYS) training program

Established in 2001, the National Youth Service (NYS) training program was created by the government of Zimbabwe (*Zimbabwe Independent* 12 May 2006; Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 10) to develop national pride in the country's youths, as well as to provide them with vocational skills (*ibid.*; Zimbabwe n.d.; *Zimbabwe Independent* 12 May 2006; UN 23 Jan. 2004). However, a number of sources consulted by the Research Directorate suggest that the NYS program has involved military training (*ibid.*; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 17 Nov. 2004; Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 10), including weapons training (*ibid.*; BBC 29 Feb. 2004) and lessons in the teachings of the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) (*ibid.*; *The Independent* 30 Mar. 2005; *Zimbabwe Independent* 12 May 2006; UN 23 Jan. 2004; see also *Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 5).

Trainees of the NYS program are commonly referred to as the "youth militia" (Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 25; Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum Nov. 2005, 37; BBC 29 Feb. 2004), the "Zanu-PF militia" (Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 25; *Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006), and the "Green Bombers" (because of their green uniforms) (Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 25; UN 23 Jan. 2004; VOA 25 Feb. 2005). The youths have reportedly been used to "harass," "intimidate" (*Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 1.c; see also IWRP 24 Jan. 2005), torture, and kill (BBC 29 Feb. 2004; ZimOnline 14 June 2005) supporters of the political opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (*Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006). A 2004 BBC documentary on the NYS indicated that the youths have been taught to torture and kill in the program's training camps (29 Feb. 2004).

The length of the NYS training program is approximately 100 days (BBC 29 Feb. 2004; see also Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 14), after which the graduates may enter a post-secondary institution (*The Herald* 13 Oct. 2005; *ibid.* 18 June 2005), or find work in the police force, the military (*The Independent* 30 Mar. 2005), the public service or the private sector (*The Herald* 13 Oct. 2005; *ibid.* 18 June 2005).

Number and location of training camps

Information on the number of NYS camps established by the Zimbabwean government is unclear among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. Several sources indicated that there were approximately ten camps across the country (Zimonline 14 June 2005; *Zimbabwe Independent* 12 May 2006; *The Herald* 18 June 2005), located in such places as Border Gezi, Dadaya, Guyu, Kamativi, Mushagashe, Vumba (ibid.), Mutare, Manicaland, and Zvishavane (UN 23 Jan. 2004). However, according to a 2003 report by Solidarity Peace Trust, there were also a number of "less formal, often very primitive camps at the district level" (5 Sept. 2003, 16). Prior to Zimbabwe's 2002 elections, more than 100 NYS camps were reportedly established across the country (ibid. 16, 34; BBC 29 Feb. 2004).

According to a 2005 Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum report, the number of NYS training camps has decreased since 2002 (Nov. 2005, 37). The report noted that the NYS program and the youth's activities "seem to have declined," likely as a result of "budgetary constraints" (ibid.).

In a 12 May 2006 newspaper article, *Zimbabwe Independent* reported that all of the NYS training camps across Zimbabwe had been shut down because of food and resource shortages (12 May 2006). The newspaper article also noted that since the "last intake" of youths in 2005, there had been no new recruits to the NYS (*Zimbabwe Independent* 12 May 2006). No information on when, or whether, the NYS training camps would be reopened could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Age of participants

According to the official website of Zimbabwe's Ministry of Youth Development and Employment Creation, the target age group of NYS program recruits is 16 to 30 years of age (Zimbabwe n.d.). However, several sources consulted by the Research Directorate suggest that youths in the program may be of a younger age (BBC 29 Feb. 2004; Dow Jones International News 3 May 2005; UN 23 Jan. 2004; Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 11), with some "as young as" eleven years of age (ibid.; BBC 29 Feb. 2004).

Recruitment

The government's Ministry of Youth Development and Employment Creation website describes the NYS program as "voluntary" (Zimbabwe n.d.). However, a 2003 report by Solidarity Peace Trust, a South-Africa-based organization committed to supporting human rights in Zimbabwe (Solidarity Peace Trust n.d.), stated that "[it] has become apparent through discussions with those who have completed the training...that a sizeable number were coerced into the training" (ibid. 5 Sept. 2003, 54). There have also been reports of youths being kidnapped into the NYS training program (ibid., 55; BBC 29 Feb. 2004).

A 2004 publication by Solidarity Peace Trust on the exodus of Zimbabwe's people reported that there are individuals who have left Zimbabwe as a result of "forced conscription into the youth militia" (Nov. 2004, 16).

ZimOnline, a Zimbabwean daily independent news service (ZimOnline n.d.), reported in a 5 May 2005 news article that the government planned to make

national service mandatory for all school-aged children so that they may be given "proper orientation" (ibid. 5 May 2005). In June 2005, the news service also reported that the Zimbabwe government was planning to "forcibly" enrol street children into the NYS program (ZimOnline 14 June 2005). No information could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate on whether these plans were implemented.

Since 2003 (Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 22), the NYS program has reportedly become a requirement for those wishing to pursue post-secondary education, or wishing to obtain a job in the public sector (ibid.; ibid. Nov. 2004, 22; UN 12 Aug. 2004; see also UN 23 Jan. 2004).

Among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate, it is unclear how many youths have been trained in the NYS camps. In sources consulted from 2005, estimates on the number of NYS-trained youths ranged from 11,000 (Dow Jones International News 3 May 2005) to 50,000 (IWPR 24 Jan. 2005; see also *The Herald* 13 Oct. 2005 and *The Independent* 30 Mar. 2005). According to a 2004 BBC documentary on the NYS, approximately 10,000 youths graduated from the NYS camps every 100 days (BBC 29 Feb. 2004; see also Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 14). No information on the total number of graduates as of June 2006 could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Exemptions to training

According to a 2003 Solidarity Peace Trust report on NYS training, youths could avoid NYS training by having relatives or parents who were "highly placed" or "influential" (5 Sept. 2003, 22). The report further noted that the Zimbabwean government's policy that made a NYS training certificate a requirement to access post-secondary education, or jobs in the public service, created a black market of counterfeit NYS training certificates (ibid.).

No further information on exemptions to service in the NYS training program could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Penalty for refusing to serve or for deserting

Poor camp conditions and "allegations of brutality" have been cited as reasons for youths deserting the NYS program (UN 23 Jan. 2004; see also Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 24). A 2004 BBC documentary on the NYS program reported that a girl who tried to escape was allegedly beaten to near death in front of the entire camp (BBC 29 Feb. 2004).

A November 2004 Solidarity Peace Trust publication reported that many Zimbabweans have fled the country in order to avoid or desert the NYS training (Nov. 2004, 22; see also Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 54). The report stated that

[m]any youths, both male and female, who have entered the youth militia programme since its inception in 2001 have emerged traumatised and have fled the country.... In some rural areas, youths who refuse to volunteer for the training are victimised; young people have fled to avoid both the training and the persecution/lack of opportunities that accompany not having completed it

(ibid. Nov. 2004, 22).

A 2003 report by the same organization indicated that

[b]oth within and without Zimbabwe, youth who have abandoned their militia camps live in fear of retribution and only speak out reluctantly. Defected militia, who have fled to Johannesburg, live in fear of retribution if they return to Zimbabwe; even in Johannesburg they report that they are not safe from the Zimbabwean CIO [Central Intelligence Organization (*Country Reports 2005* 8 Mar. 2006, Sec. 1)] (Solidarity Peace Trust 5 Sept. 2003, 57)

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Oral sources: Solidarity Peace Trust provided links to published documents. Zimrights did not provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

Internet sites, including: All Africa, Amnesty International (AI), Center on Conscience and War, Factiva, Freedom House, Human Rights Forum Zimbabwe,

Human Rights Trust of Southern Africa (SAHRIT), Human Rights Watch (HRW), International Crisis Group (ICG), Movement For Democratic Change (MDC), Physicians for Human Rights - Denmark (PHR-DK), United Kingdom (UK) Home Office, War Resisters' International (WRI).

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