

White South Africans feel pull of home

By Richard Lapper in Johannesburg

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Cape Town life: some younger professionals take a more realistic view of their country's prospects

After 15 years in London, Willem De Klerk was apprehensive when he came home to South Africa at the end of last year.

"When I raised it with my friends they told me I was making the biggest mistake of my life," says the 41-year-old former civil servant. But it has not taken him long to realise he made the right decision.

"Life in the UK has got very hard and in the last six months we found it impossible to break even," says Mr De Klerk, who says he, his wife and small child opted to swap their house outside London for a property three times as big near Pretoria, South Africa's capital.

"We liked what we could get for our money here and are doing better than we have ever done before in our lives," he says.

Mr De Klerk may be part of a growing trend. A year ago, with power cuts, xenophobic violence, persistently high crime and political uncertainty contributing to a mood of near despair in better-off suburban areas, it appeared that white South Africans could not get out of the country quickly enough.

On the surface, the recent – and so far controversially successful effort – by one white South African to secure refugee status, on the grounds his colour made him a particular target for criminals, in Canada would seem to suggest this is still the case.

In fact, although the evidence suggests that while deep concerns over affirmative action and crime remain, some white South Africans are beginning to look for a way to get home, partly because of the economic downturn in the UK, Australia and Dubai but also cautiously greater optimism at South Africa's own prospects.

South Africa does not provide official numbers and some analysts suggest that many of the people who do emigrate depart unrecorded. The Institute of Race Relations has extrapolated from census data that in the decade after 1995, a year after the end of white rule, more than 750,000 whites emigrated, although the data are disputed. At the end of apartheid there were 5.2m whites in South Africa.

However, figures from removals companies and other businesses indicate the number of people returning is climbing. Charles Luyckx, chief executive of Elliott International, has seen about 60 South Africans use his relocations company's services each month in the first eight months of the year, almost double the figure in the same period of last year. He reckons Elliott has a market share of between 25 per cent and 30 per cent. "There has been a big shift in confidence," he says.

Another company, Stuttaford Van Lines, says it handled 80 repatriations in the second quarter this year, a third more than in the same period last year. Tyron

Asylum ruling under fire

The decision this month by an independent Canadian immigration panel to award refugee status to a 31-year-old white South African on the grounds that black criminals were persecuting him has caused international controversy, **writes Richard Lapper in Johannesburg.**

Brandon Huntley had been living illegally in Canada when he made the application. South Africa's government said the allegations were "as preposterous as they are

Whitley, 34, who returned from the UK to Durban 18 months ago and has built a small business by organising the shipment home of cars for fellow returnees, also notes a surge in returnees. "Last year we were giving three quotes a week, this year there have been one or two every day," he says.

Mr Luyckx, says that while four white South Africans were leaving for every one returning last year, the ratio is closer to one to one. A recent report by FNB, one of the largest banks, says in the first quarter of this year only 11 per cent of properties traded were sold by emigrants. The figure had climbed to 20 per cent of the total at the height of last year's jitters.

The depth of the recession in the Australia, UK, and Dubai appears to have been important in this apparent shift of sentiment, with "30-something" professionals in finance and IT finding opportunities or contract-work dwindling.

South Africa's own recession has been less severe and its political outlook is improving. President Jacob Zuma, elected in April, is controversial but during his first few months in office he has sounded a more inclusive note than Thabo Mbeki, the last elected president, reassuring minority white, Indian and coloured populations.

"Zuma is talking the talk. Let's give him his due," says Greg Anderson, a 41-year-old who left his London-based IT business to return to Cape Town a few months ago.

London-based Tim Schultz, 35, who plans to quit his marketing job to return home, says: "A lot of the divisions of the last two years have faded and the temperature has been lowered."

All this is helping some younger professionals take a more realistic view of their country's prospects, comparing them with other emerging markets such as Brazil or India, rather than with more developed countries, as their parents and grandparents would have done.

As Mr Schultz puts it: "The younger generation don't tend to see things through the same apocalyptic prism."

*This is the **fifth in a series** examining the impact of the global crisis on migrants round the world*

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laughable", while the governing African National Congress said the decision "only seeks to perpetuate racism".

The Canadian government is seeking to challenge the decision in the courts. While violent crime is a serious problem in South Africa, black South Africans – who make up about 80 per cent of the country's population – are themselves big victims, with those in poor areas especially vulnerable.

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