

## Britain Defends Help For Elderly Leaving Zimbabwe

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Britain defended a plan to help its elderly citizens leave Zimbabwe, saying Friday in response to media criticism that it would not be a mass evacuation.

The British government announced last month that it would help citizens aged 70 and over resettle in the United Kingdom. Younger Britons with health or other problems may also be eligible. British officials say a few hundred elderly Britons have inquired about the repatriation plan.

The state media labeled the plan racist. Independent newspaper columnist Joram Nyathi alleged last week that Britain imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe and then "you airlift your own to safety." President Robert Mugabe said last week he had no objection to elderly Britons' departure.

"I don't see any reason why anyone would want old people," Mugabe said in an interview on state television marking his 85th birthday.

Andrew Pocock, the British ambassador to Harare, said in a letter in Nyathi's Zimbabwe Independent newspaper that only small numbers of vulnerable, elderly Britons were eligible.

"It is an offer of assistance to British people who meet certain criteria of age and vulnerability, and who wish to leave Zimbabwe because they can no longer maintain themselves here," Pocock said.

Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain in 1980, but many Britons remained in the country, often as landowners and major businessmen.

Mugabe often fans racial resentment in a country that suffered under white minority rule to score political points by calling his black opponents tools of former colonial master Britain and railing against white control of the economy.

Mugabe blames his economic crisis on Western economic sanctions.

Mugabe's critics point instead to corruption and mismanagement under Mugabe. Foreign aid and investment has dried up since the often violent seizures of white-owned farms began at Mugabe's orders in 2000, disrupting the agriculture based economy.

Pocock wrote that British sanctions "consist solely of an asset freeze and visa ban on 203 people responsible for the destruction of good governance, democracy and the rule of law in Zimbabwe."

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