



Response

27th September 2019

South Africa and Xenophobia

The last month has seen the reoccurrence of what has variously been called xenophobia or Afrophobia. It is widely acknowledged that these attacks are a toxic mix of deep-seated prejudices, acts of wanton criminality, some instances of misinformation and false or dated news, and the consequences of the many social pathologies that plague South Africa. Human Rights Watch has also pointed to the lack of effective policing and the failure to protect foreign nationals and their property. Similar attacks took place in 2008 and 2015¹. Since March 2019 there have also been approximately 75 attacks on foreign lorry drivers and their cargoes, especially on the N3 connecting Durban and Johannesburg.² The South African Police Service have confirmed twelve deaths, two Zimbabweans and ten South Africans, as a result of the latest attacks³. 639 arrests have been made to date⁴.

The Government has been criticised for what is seen a tardy response and, where responses have been forthcoming, they have been characterised as ‘mixed messaging’⁵. A London-based human rights organisation has described government action as ‘lethargic’. Despite mounting evidence of xenophobic attacks the Government has not accelerated the implementation of the National Plan to Combat Xenophobia⁶.

President Ramaphosa condemned the attacks on foreign nationals and said that they had damaged the economy and confidence in the country⁷. The President said that there was no excuse for xenophobia or any form of intolerance, and called on all people to desist from fuelling a climate of fear and confusion, especially through fake news⁸. The President also announced that he has dispatched special envoys to apologise to various African countries for the xenophobic attacks and to begin to heal rifts between South Africa and other African countries⁹. Speaking at the funeral of former President Robert Mugabe, President Ramaphosa expressed ‘regret and apologies; and added that ‘we are working hard to embrace people from other countries.’¹⁰ The President called for a culture of dialogue in raising concerns around perceptions of foreign nationals.

What remains a disturbing feature is the provocative rhetoric employed by politicians. In 2017 the journalist Stephen Grootes analysed this in ways that remain helpful. He pointed out how senior political figures and leaders with influence are let off the hook when they make inflammatory statements, and that they are seldom held to account for actions that flow from their comments¹¹. A recent article by Susan Tolmay raises questions around whether a migrant population of 1.64m people, about 2.8% of the South African population, can indeed be called ‘an influx’ and thus warrant

the vehement claims of job taking, etc.¹² She also blames the government for not providing jobs and thus argues that the blame should be laid at the government's door and not at the door of foreign nationals. In a 2018 article, Jacques Julius argues that the serious question is the porous borders and that attention should be paid to the 4 862kms of land borders which have only 15 SANDF sub-units to patrol them¹³. He argues that no country can support a 'free for all crossing of borders'. He posits that if borders were properly patrolled there would be better entry criteria and that this would reduce internal tensions and thus reduce xenophobia.

A worrying phenomenon in this round of xenophobic attacks has been the attacks on the two Mosques, one in Nugget Street, Johannesburg and the other in Katlehong. This threatens to increase suspicions and thus undermine the good relations between religious communities in South Africa.¹⁴

The Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, in a statement by the Justice and Peace Commission, urged the intelligence community to be more proactive around the outbursts of xenophobia and not to use foreigners as scapegoats¹⁵. Archbishop Buti Tlhagale of Johannesburg condemned the xenophobic attacks and decried attempts to write them off as ordinary criminal activity¹⁶. He urged people of goodwill to contest the narrative of reducing the attacks to anti-drug protests. The Jesuit Institute¹⁷ called for leaders to act responsibly and deplored the 'violence, thuggery and looting [which] violated human rights and made a mockery of the law enshrined in the Constitution.' In a statement Fr Rampe Hlobo SJ pointed to poor leadership as a major contributor to the scourges of both femicide and xenophobia. Anglican Archbishop Thabo Makgoba¹⁸ said that he was ashamed and appalled by the xenophobia and asked the President to ensure that branches of government acted swiftly to ensure that perpetrators were arrested and prosecuted.

There is a deep consensus that these activities bring shame upon the country, are disastrous for social cohesion and national morale, and are an affront to the dignity of all. Archbishop Makgoba is spot on when he says that even the appellation of 'foreign national' is problematic for all are children of God and thus no one is foreign. We all have a role to play in countering this scourge and it is pointless to wait for government or civil society or the faith communities to act first. We all need to act together and to do so urgently.

Peter-John Pearson
Director

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/13/south-africa-punish-xenophobic-violence>

² <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/alert-for-truck-violence-20190718>

³ <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/gauteng-xenophobic-violence-10-of-12-victimswere-south-africans-defence-minister-20190910>

⁴ <https://city-press.news24.com/News/12-dead-639-arrested-following-xenophobic-violence-20190909>

⁵ <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/09/xenophobia-amnesty-berates-south-africa-ramaphosas-poor-handling/>

⁶ <http://www.justice.gov.za/docs/other-docs/nap.html>

⁷ <https://ewn.co.za/2019/09/06/ramaphosa-xenophobic-attacks-have-damaged-economy-confidence-in-sa>

⁸ <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/gender-based-violence-and-xenophobia-read-cyril-ramaphosas-full-speech-32032617>

⁹ <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/ramaphosa-deploys-special-envoy-to-make-amends-with-african-countries/>

¹⁰ <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/robert-mugabe-funeral-ramaphosa-xenophobia-south-africa/>

¹¹ <https://www.nigeriansinsouthafrica.co.za/stephen-grootes-the-awful-politics-of-xenophobia/>

¹² <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2019-08-30-xenophobia-in-south-africa-what-happened-to-ubuntu/>

¹³<http://www.morningsideneews.co.za/jacques-julius-xenophobia-vs-effective-border-management-distinguishing-fact-from-fearmongering/>

¹⁴<https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/xenophobic-violence-johannesburg-moqsue-death-toll/>

¹⁵<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/africa/news/2019-04/sa-xenophobia-bishop-urges-intelligence-services-to-be-proactiv.html>

¹⁶<https://www.informationng.com/2019/09/south-african-catholic-bishops-react-to-xenophobia-attacks-on-foreign-nationals.html>

¹⁷<https://jena.africa/2019/09/03/leaders-take-responsibility-jesuit-of-south-africa-issued-a-statement-regarding-recent-xenophobic-attacks/>

¹⁸<https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-09-08-arrest-prosecute-xenophobia-cases-anglican-archbishop/>