

# XENOPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICA: VIOLENCE AGAINST NIGERIAN IMMIGRANTS

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 Analysis

Emmanue Iyoha migrated to South Africa with his family at the age of six in pursuit of better opportunities. But 10 years later, he and 640 other Nigerian citizens were forced to flee the exact country they had hoped would provide them a chance of a better life. Deadly xenophobic riots in Pretoria and Johannesburg that happened recently killed at least 12 people and destroyed foreign-owned businesses. Meanwhile in Nigeria, South African businesses were forced to shut down for several days as retaliatory attacks were carried out and the South African Embassy had to be closed for safety concerns.

Fear is what foreigners live with on daily basis in South Africa's Central Business Districts (CBD). There is a perpetual hatred towards foreigners especially from African countries who are accused of taking over jobs that would be reserved for the country's natives. In a country where the unemployment rate is very high, many

South Africans see foreigners as living large, driving luxury cars and enjoying the country at a time when conditions are hard for them. Aisha Cisse, a South African businesswoman said to Reuters and put it simply that jealousy is driving these attacks. Politicians and other South African leaders insist the country is not xenophobic. South African Minister of Foreign Affairs Naledi Pandor claimed many Nigerians are engaging in criminal activities and requested the Nigerian government to help keep those Nigerian "criminals" in Nigeria. The Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng, while addressing graduates at the University of KwaZulu-Natal argued that it is hunger, not xenophobia that is the cause of violence in the country. He explained that those committing violent attacks, like those in the Johannesburg CBD, did so out of desperation. To solve the issue, he added, "People needed to be taught more than just to love one another".



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It is true that a lot needs to be done although love is a crucial part of the plan. Because at first it was love that the Africans offered to assist their South African compatriots in the struggle against apartheid. Nelson Mandela in his autobiography “Long Walk to Freedom” documents how other African countries toiled to support the struggle financially, emotionally and even physically. It is safe to assume that without the comradeship and love from other African countries, South Africa would still be grappling with apartheid. Just as the desperation to free the black South Africans from apartheid forced many to migrate to other countries where they managed to solicit for support, it is the same desperation that drives many Africans from their homelands to Africa’s second-largest economy to look for a livelihood. President Cyril Ramaphosa echoed that message as he reminded South Africans that, “the people from other countries on our continent stood with us in our darkest hours during the struggle against Apartheid”.

That heroic role was so vital that just weeks after Nelson Mandela was released from prison he embarked an 18-country tour thanking states that had helped stop apartheid. These “frontline states” supported the African National Congress (ANC) when it was banned by the apartheid government and its members forced into exile. Zambia, for instance, was a critical transit point for South Africans as they traveled on the “Freedom Ferry” from Botswana across the Zambezi river to Tanzania to be trained as Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) soldiers. ANC members were accustomed to crossing into Lesotho at night for meetings. Subsequently, these efforts were able to bear fruit as apartheid ended.

It was expected that solidarity and friendship would blossom in appreciation of these efforts. But contrary to these expectations xenophobic incidents against Africans increased after majority rule in 1994. In September 1998 a Mozambican national and two Senegalese were thrown out of a train by a group returning from a rally that blamed foreigners for unemployment, crime and AIDS. In 2000, seven foreigners

were killed in the Cape Flats over fears that outsiders would claim properties belonging to the locals. In 2006 about 47 Somalis were murdered in a campaign to drive Somali traders out of the townships in Western Cape. In May 2008, a series of attacks left 62 people dead and in October 2015 attacks specifically targeting Muslims in Grahamstown displaced more than 500 people and 300 shops and homes were looted. In February 2017, at a large anti-immigrant protest in Pretoria protesters accused immigrants of taking jobs from South Africans, singling out Nigerians for their arrogance and country’s crimes.

For many years the demand for labor in mining and construction sectors drove migrants into South Africa. Later, traders and other service providers joined. Consequently, South Africa became one of the leading recipients of economic migrants on the continent. Migration in Africa is primarily interregional. International migration, especially to the outside, is limited by resources and the high risks involved. This leaves migrating to neighboring countries became the best viable option for many. In his thesis, Kangave Badru noticed that migration rates tend to be higher among countries whose ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds are more similar. Those who travel beyond these grounds are often subjected to disappointments in the form of discrimination, rejection, and abuse. Thus, at first, the majority of migrants into South Africa came from neighboring countries like Zimbabwe. This kind of migration may at first seem invisible because of the shared cultures. However, as more people from farther places arrive, slowly but surely the trend incited hatred and violence. This may partly explain why the latest incidents targeted Nigerian citizens.

What exacerbates the “jealousy” has more to do with urban setting after desegregation. During the apartheid, wealthy cities were often a reserve of wealthy white minorities. Following desegregation, a phenomenon known as “white-flight” resulted in wealthy people moving from the crowded city centers to less

crowded suburbs leaving the CBDs deprived of capital to sustain them. When this happened property values plummeted and violence rate surged. The natives who had expected to fill the vacuum left for them found themselves competing with new foreigners. The difference is that the new foreigners are now black and equally desperate but often more willing to work under tight conditions without the expectation of free services from the state. They do not complain much, but the natives feel they have more right over these new foreigners and continue to press with the narrative of exclusion. It is then made worse when the leaders are reluctant to acknowledge and condemn the acts as xenophobia for political expediency.

Yet across the continent, the African solidarity, which has been central to the struggle for social and economic emancipation of the African people, is threatened and waning as a result of these xenophobic attacks. South Africa is losing its stock of political capital that it has been using to intervene in ameliorating problems on the continent. South African businesses are

threatened, and protests against the country were held in many countries from Nigeria, D.R Congo and Zambia among others. The rainbow nation that was envisaged as a hope for all is now becoming the pariah of Africa. Its aberrant course comes at a time of optimism on the continent

following the enactment of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, which is expected to ease the flow of goods and human recourses across the continent. South Africa, which just recently hosted the World Economic Forum Africa, is expected to be the gate pass to free trade of the continent.

Xenophobic violence in the country is abysmal and must be condemned in the strongest terms possible. This renunciation of violence is after all what distinguishes a civilized society

from a barbaric one as Jaeger succinctly says, “when a society educates its members to the extent that all groups within it willingly make this renunciation (of violence)...then we can speak of civilization and no longer merely society”.

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