Violent attacks on immigrants in South Africa

Ann Talbot
21 May 2008

At least 32 people have been killed in violent attacks on immigrants in South Africa. It is reported that upwards of 6,000 people have sought shelter in police stations and churches.

One man was burnt alive in a necklace killing and others have been shot, beaten and stabbed with machetes. Shops and homes have been looted and burnt in the working class districts around Johannesburg, which is the financial centre of South Africa.

The attacks began a week ago in the townships of Alexandra, in northern Johannesburg, and Diepsloot, southwest of the city. From there it spread to Zandspruit, Tembisa, Primrose, Reiger Park and Thokoza.

The violence did not hit the headlines in the foreign press until it spread into the business district of the city centre, as it did over the weekend. There were skirmishes at the Pritchard Street Central Methodist Church, which has become home to some 1,000 mainly Zimbabwean migrants.

There is a history of violence against migrants in South Africa, but it has never before reached this level. Government ministers are discussing whether to deploy the army, which has not been used in support of the civil power since 1994.

Dr. Eric Goemaere of Medecin Sans Frontieres said that the situation amounted to a humanitarian crisis with thousands left destitute as a result of the attacks. “This reminds me of a refugee situation,” he said. “I have treated bullet wounds, beaten people, rape victims, and the people are terrified.”

“There is no way the police will be able to protect foreigners,” Goemaere warned. “All they can do is react to an outbreak of violence. The violence is spreading, and the situation is tense.”

There are now fears that the violence could spread to Cape Town. Somali shopkeepers in Cape Town have received letters warning them to leave.

Tseliso Thipanyane, chief executive of the South African Human Rights Commission, accused the government of poor leadership and of ignoring the mounting xenophobia in the townships.

“There is definitely a competition for scarce resources, houses and jobs and other services. If you look at where the majority of attacks have happened, it’s largely in poor areas, where black people find themselves living,” Thipanyane said.

“It is in the townships, the inner-city where conditions are quite terrible. You have poor black people fighting against poor black people from other countries.”

Much of the violence seems to have been directed against Zimbabweans. There are an estimated 3 million Zimbabweans in South Africa. The majority of them have no legal status. They have fled across the border to escape the violence of the Mugabe regime, unemployment and mounting poverty.

Teachers and other professionals have been forced to take jobs as housekeepers and cleaners in South Africa as their salaries have been rendered worthless by hyperinflation in Zimbabwe. They are accused of taking the jobs of South Africans.

“They are being used as scapegoats,” said Eddie Matsangaise, programme manager for the Zimbabwe Exiles Forum in South Africa. “They have fallen from the pot into the fire.”

Rocky Moyo, who came to Alexandra three years ago from Zimbabwe, told IRIN how he had been driven from his home by men with guns. “They started beating people and telling them to get out of their houses. They said, ‘We don’t want you here, you must leave our country!’ I had to jump through a window to save my life.”

The attacks were not just directed against Zimbabweans. Nigerians were also targeted. Some were attacked in church, and others were dragged from buses and beaten.

Immigrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi who fled to the Diepsloot police station reported being attacked by men wielding guns and iron bars who chanted, “Kick the foreigners out.”

The boom in the construction industry in preparation for the World Cup in 2010 has led to an influx of workers from all over Africa. The South African economy has been growing on average 5 percent a year for the last four years. But the growth has not created many new jobs, while thousands of jobs have been lost in the mining sector. Unemployment officially stands at 23 percent, but is in fact much higher.

Prince Mashele, senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies, said, “A situation like this has been brewing since 1994. People were promised houses and basic services that they never received.”

Improvements in housing, electricity and water supply, health and education that were anticipated after the end of apartheid have not materialised. While the majority of the poor find themselves living in conditions that are as bad as or worse than under apartheid, a tiny minority of the elite in the African National Congress have become fabulously wealthy. The gap between the rich and poor has widened under the ANC government. Black empowerment has created a layer of rich businessmen who no longer have anything in common with the majority of ANC supporters.

Leaders of the ANC have been quick to shift the blame. Fingers have been pointed at the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). Many victims reported being attacked by Zulus. ANC Secretary-General Gwede Mantashe said, “If you look into the ... flashpoints, there are structures of the IFP.”

There are some grounds for accusing the IFP of scapegoating immigrants. As early as 1994 the IFP threatened to take “physical action” if the government failed to take measures to deal with the issue of undocumented migrants. But the leader of the IFP, Mangosutho Buthelezi, was minister for Home Affairs.

Since then there have been sporadic attacks on immigrants, but nothing that compares to the present scale of violence. The

© World Socialist Web Site

government has opened talks with the IFP about the situation.

Moeletsi Mbeki, brother of President Thabo Mbeki and deputy chairman of the South African Institute for International Affairs, laid the blame for the violence at the door of the ANC government. This situation had been developing over the last eight years, Mbeki said.

He said that he had repeatedly warned the government that its support for the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe would lead to an economic meltdown with serious consequences for South Africa. The violence, he said, was the result of allowing Mugabe to destroy the economy of Zimbabwe and force the population out of the country.

Speaking on Channel 4 News, he said that one of the sparks that had set off the conflagration was the fact that the ruling layers within the ANC "are at one another's throats."

The shantytowns of South Africa, Mbeki said, were "huge pressure cookers of poverty and HIV/AIDS, so they are tinderboxes that are waiting to go up in flames at any time and they are now beginning to go up."

People no longer had confidence in the government to solve their problems, Mbeki said.

The Zuma faction of the ANC has been quick to make political capital out of the attacks on foreigners. They have called for an early election. Jacob Zuma became leader of the ANC last year, while Thabo Mbeki remains president until April 2009.

ANC Treasurer-General Matthews Phosa said that the problem was the existence of two centres of power in the ANC: "The reality is that we have an elected president of the ruling party, but that he is not the president of the country."

"I think the best option—without apology—would be an early election," Phosa added. "The situation is not healthy—we are still a year away from the election and by making the election date earlier we can reach a quick, less-painful and more-productive solution."

President Thabo Mbeki, he said, "has lost the confidence of his party, partly because of the perception that he has lost touch with the wishes of the majority."

Phosa compared the situation to the period at the end of apartheid when President P.W. Botha had a stroke and relinquished his position as head of the National Party, but continued to rule the country. Two rival centres of power emerged around F.W de Klerk and Botha.

The government's responsibility for the situation is, if anything, even more direct than its critics allow. Government ministers have consistently demonised illegal immigrants, while at the same time making it extremely difficult for them to gain legal status.

Even in the midst of the violence, the police have been arresting illegal immigrants. Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) reported a case in Olifantsfontein in which 32 foreigners were attacked and robbed.

"The police in response to these attacks proceeded to arrest these victims as they were unable to produce any documentation as to their lawful status in South Africa," LHR said.

LHR said that the victims were then taken to a deportation camp and denied their right to press charges. "Surely criminals must not be encouraged to attack foreign nationals because they know that they will most likely be deported before they are able to act as witness in a trial."

The government response to the violence has been to deploy police armed with rubber bullets on the streets of working class districts.

The South African Congress of Trade Unions (COSATU), which supported Zuma in his bid to win control of the ANC, has protested against the violence.

COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi said, "I want to send this message: It is not the Zimbabwean (exiles) that cause the problems (of the South African poor)."

He blamed the capitalist system. Poor Zimbabweans, Vavi said, were scrambling for the same resources as poor South Africans, but it was not a justification for xenophobia.

COSATU organised a demonstration outside parliament in conjunction with the ANC and the South African Communist Party to protest against the violence, the situation in Zimbabwe, and high food prices. It was poorly attended. Press reports suggest that only about 100 people took part.

This low turnout reflects COSATU's lack of credibility after supporting the government for the last 14 years. Vavi blames capitalism for the social conditions faced by South African workers, but he has consistently backed every free-market measure introduced by the ANC government.

COSATU opposes Thabo Mbeki's policy in Zimbabwe. But it has supported the Zimbabwean opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, which wants a return to International Monetary Fund policies. The IMF has imposed Structural Adjustment Plans on most African countries forcing them to adopt free-market measures that caused massive unemployment and poverty.

Zuma, who has the support of the South African Communist Party and COSATU, likes to portray himself as a "left" at home. But when he is touting for support in Europe and America, he makes it clear that he is in favour of capitalist measures. He has won the backing of Wall Street magnates and the editors of *Time* magazine, who see in him the man to manage the South African working class.

The violence of the last week may well encourage Zuma and his supporters to move more quickly against Mbeki. Foreign investors are getting increasingly nervous. "The violence is not a good signal for investors," said Raoul Luttik, senior investment manager, ING Investment Management in The Hague, Netherlands.

The attacks on foreigners have added to concerns stemming from the crisis in the electricity supply industry that forced some mines to shut down in recent months. There are fears for the tourist industry. As the violence continues the rand has begun to weaken.

This is an unsustainable situation. It is in large measure an outcome of the growing political crisis within the ANC and can only deepen that crisis.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site