

South Africa: Anti-immigrant violence subsides but leaves humanitarian crisis

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An uneasy calm has descended on the South African townships and squatter camps after three weeks of anti-foreigner violence that left more than 50 dead, 650 seriously injured and an estimated 80,000 displaced. Tens of thousands are thought to have fled the country. Others are housed in temporary shelters, unable to return to their homes in South Africa for fear of further attacks or to their country of origin. Those who have been displaced are still housed in churches, community halls and police stations that opened their doors to them at the height of the attacks.

Conditions in these makeshift facilities are appalling. Many people are sleeping outside in winter conditions. "It's very cold at night," said Muriel Cornelis of Medecin sans Frontieres. "It's almost like one or two degrees. It's been raining in the last few days." "We have problems with sanitation," said Francoise Le Goff of the International Red Cross. "It's cold; people are getting sick."

A camp at Onderstepoort, north of Pretoria, was described as being like "a pigsty." It houses 2,000 people including babies and pregnant women but has only two portable toilets. There is no electricity or running water. Cases of diarrhoea and chest infections are already being reported. The Western Cape government has appealed to the central government for disaster area status and has asked the United Nations for help. The African National Congress government has evinced complete indifference to the fate of the thousands of men, women and children who have been terrorised and displaced. It was individuals and community groups that responded to the crisis by supplying shelter, food, blankets and clothes.

Charities set up for other purposes have stepped into the breach. Near Johannesburg, the Village Safe Haven, a foster home and feeding scheme, has taken in displaced people and is preparing 9,000 meals a day for those who took refuge at Alexandra police station. "People have been coming by until nine in the evening, and not all of it has been big donations," said Susan Harris who runs the charity. "Sometimes it's just someone with a blanket and a grocery store carrier bag, and as soon as it comes in, it goes out."

The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) has been coordinating relief efforts in Cape Town. TAC was set up to campaign for HIV/AIDS treatment. "We have basically stepped in and fulfilled the role of the state over the last three days," Nathan Geffen of TAC told the UN news service IRIN, "and the state has utterly failed in its duty, particularly at the provincial and national level. But all three tiers—city, province and nation—have failed to work together appropriately. Last night we informed the city and province that they have until Wednesday afternoon [May 28] to take over the functions that we've been providing here, because this is not sustainable. We are not a disaster response unit."

Zonke Majodina of the South African Human Rights Commission said, "Government is not charting a course of action. Political leaders have made very few statements, and have not come up with a coordinated response." At one point, the government said that it would set up seven camps for the displaced people, but this was almost immediately denied

by other government sources.

International aid agencies have expressed fears that such camps would themselves become the focus of conflicts and be insecure for women and children. Those who have been displaced have also voiced their concerns about being sent to camps. "When they put you in a camp, they have control over you," John Mazambi, a spokesman for a group of Somalis who took refuge at Caledon Square police station in Cape Town told IRIN. "I can't afford to be put in a jail for I don't know how long. From today, we have stopped accepting food. We are not here for people to feed us; so, from today we will refuse all food until we get some answers."

Helen Hacksley, a volunteer from Rondebosch United Church in suburban Cape Town, told IRIN "A lot of these guys [displaced people] are the sole breadwinner for 12 people back home and can't afford not to work, so for them it's not an option to go 50 kilometres up the west coast to sit in a camp. They aren't here to sit and be fed; they came here to support a dozen people back home."

The failure to respond to the humanitarian crisis has seriously undermined the political credibility of the ANC at home and abroad. President Thabo Mbeki only appeared on television to make a statement after the violence had gone on for two weeks. "Shocked citizens have been pouring onto the streets to express their disgust and offer what comfort they can," wrote the *Sowetan*. "But where are our leaders?"

Newspapers all over the continent have been critical of Mbeki's "apathy" towards the fate of their nationals. The Nigerian newspaper *This Day* described his government's response as "inexplicably slow, ponderous, and inadequate." Unfavourable comparisons were drawn between the way in which ANC members were given refuge in other African countries during the apartheid years and the way in which the ANC government has allowed nationals of those countries to be treated. African papers drew attention to the very different treatment that is meted out to South Africa businesses that are behaving like corporate criminals in the rest of Africa and other Africans who attempt to set up businesses in South Africa.

Mbeki identified himself with Pan-Africanism in his "I am an African" speech in 1996 when the new South African constitution was adopted. The following year, he put forward the concept of an African Renaissance, which, he said, marked the third moment in the post-colonial history of Africa when Africa would emerge as a significant geo-political player on the basis of economic development and social cohesion. It was to be based on the spirit of *ubuntu*—which Mbeki said comprised humanism, compassion and solidarity.

"As the basis of African unity, 'African Renaissance' drew heavily from philosophical ideas of pan-Africanism, negritude, ubuntu and black consciousness as the basis of African unity, dignity and pride," wrote Dr. Peter Kagwanja in the Nairobi-based *Nation*.

The spectacle of black South Africans attacking and even killing other Africans, looting their possessions and burning their homes has destroyed whatever credibility Mbeki's rhetoric had. Nonetheless, he returned to it,

speaking of the debt that South Africa owed the rest of the continent when he eventually appeared on television to condemn the violence.

Mbeki did not visit any of the townships. Instead, he went to Japan. A spokesman said that he was too busy. Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka went to the township of Orange Farm in Gauteng province near Johannesburg to speak to local residents. This visit turned into a fiasco that served only to demonstrate how out of touch the leadership of the ANC is with the grassroots.

Cyril Ramaphosa had to be introduced when he turned up at the Thetha Secondary School in Orange Farm. Once a trade union leader, Ramaphosa is now a multimillionaire businessman who sits on the boards of Coca Cola and Unilever. He remains a leader of the ANC, but was unknown to the local people who turned out to meet the delegation.

The ignorance of this top-level ANC delegation was demonstrated by the fact that few foreigners actually live in Orange Farm. The residents were angry about the lack of services. The politicians had only turned up now, they said, because they were concerned about how the xenophobic violence looked to the outside world.

There have been many reasons cited for the outbreak of anti-immigrant violence in South Africa. Economic growth has hit a six-year low. The mines have been scaling back production, bringing their output to the lowest level in four decades. This is in large part due to the breakdown of the electricity supply system, which has forced mines to close.

There is deep anger over the failure of the government to deliver even the most basic services such as electricity and water. And there is intense competition for jobs, so foreigners have come to be seen as rivals.

Crime is a major problem, and immigrants are often blamed for it. Food prices are rising, hitting the poor hardest. The gap between rich and poor is growing. South Africa is the most unequal country in the world next to Brazil.

Many of these social problems have been fuelling xenophobic violence for several years. The scale of the latest outbreak, however, is new. Some commentators have pointed to a mysterious third force, to organised crime, or have blamed the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party. But the real political responsibility lies with the ANC itself.

There has been considerable criticism of Mbeki. His handling of Zimbabwe has been cited as one of the causes of the present crisis in South Africa. Thousands of Zimbabweans have fled economic meltdown and political repression to South Africa. An estimated 3 million Zimbabweans are now in South Africa.

The South African *Sunday Times* called on Mbeki to step down from office. Mbeki has "shown himself to be not only uncaring but utterly incompetent," a front-page editorial declared.

Nelson Mandela would have gone to the townships, Mbeki's critics have said. But even if the former president would have acted differently, the recent violence is as much the outcome of Mandela's political perspective as it is of Mbeki's.

From its inception, the ANC supported capitalism. Before it came to power, it planned to nationalise the main industries and had aspirations to social welfare measures. But that was no more than many capitalist governments had done in the post-war period. Even these reformist measures were dropped prior to the ANC assuming power in 1994.

As the hand-over from the apartheid regime was being discussed, the leaders of the ANC, according to Mandela's biographer Anthony Sampson, agreed to a secret letter of intent that "committed them to reducing the deficit, to high interest rates and to an open economy, in return for access to an IMF loan of \$850 million, if required."

This agreement was entirely in keeping with the principles of the Freedom Charter, which had committed the ANC to a capitalist programme in 1955. Mandela reiterated the capitalist perspective of the ANC the following year, stating: "The breaking up and democratisation of these monopolies will open up fresh fields for the development of a

prosperous non-European bourgeois class. For the first time in the history of this country the non-European bourgeoisie will have the opportunity to own in their own name and right mills and factories and trade and private enterprise will boom and flourish as never before."

That is exactly what the ANC has done since it came to power. The "non-European bourgeois class" of which Mandela spoke so enthusiastically takes the form of men like Cyril Ramaphosa, who have profited from power and amassed personal fortunes worth millions of dollars.

South African industry depends on migrant labour. The government has encouraged migration while refusing migrants the legal status that would offer them the same protection as citizens. As a result, migrants are open to the most blatant forms of exploitation and serve as a reserve army of cheap labour. It is estimated that one third of the workforce in the mines are from other African countries. The influx of migrants into South Africa reflects the fact that South Africa accounts for one third of the economy of sub-Saharan Africa. In pursuing an explicitly national economic policy, the ANC government has confirmed the division between South Africa and the rest of Africa that was created under direct colonial rule.

The call for Mbeki to go reflects the depth of the political crisis in South Africa, but it is not a sufficient response to a situation that has a long history rooted in the very nature of ANC. Changing the personnel at the top will resolve nothing.

Mbeki's rival for the presidency, Jacob Zuma, who is now president of the ANC, and Winnie Madikizela-Mandela have both visited areas hit by violence. They lay claim to the more radical grassroots traditions of the ANC. But neither of these politicians has an alternative to the perspective Mbeki has followed.

Zuma is backed by the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). The SACP has called for Mbeki to go. COSATU does not endorse this call but has said that the South African people have lost confidence in Mbeki's ability to govern. Their support gives Zuma a certain left-wing appearance. But both these organisations have been vital props of the ANC government since it came to power. It was the SACP that drafted the Freedom Charter, with its commitment to private enterprise. Neither the SACP nor COSATU can distance itself from the present crisis in which they have had so great a hand.

The population of the working class districts has no political means of expressing their discontent. After almost a decade and a half, nobody any longer expects the ANC to resolve the social and economic problems that they face in the townships and squatter camps. Under these circumstances, the most reactionary political tendencies have found expression in the xenophobic attacks. Some members of the ANC youth are thought to have been directly involved. They were seen using the name of the party and singing revolutionary songs as they carried out their attacks.

For the majority of the population who took no part in the attacks, and those who expressed their hostility to them by offering assistance to the victims, the ANC is an entirely alien political entity. It no longer enjoys the mass support it had in the first elections after apartheid, when it became the vehicle for hopes of social progress. In the interim, the implications of the perspective of the ANC have become all too apparent. Those who looked to it in the past need a new political perspective that is based on socialist internationalism and production for need not profit, rather than nationalism and the preservation of the profit system.



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