

Xenophobic attacks on foreign shop-owners spread in Gauteng, South Africa

Thabo Seseane Jr.
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On Sunday, two victims were found shot to death in Langlaagte, Johannesburg, following a spate of attacks on foreign shop-owners in Gauteng beginning January 19.

According to the South African Police Services (SAPS), a group of people looted a foreign-owned spaza (tuck-shop, or candy store) in Langlaagte and set another building alight. Shots were then fired, resulting in the death of the two South Africans. The SAPS, who reportedly found one person on the road and another at Zamimpilo, a squatter camp near Langlaagte, are investigating a case of arson and murder.

The looting and violence are in response to the shooting death of 14-year-old Siphiwe Mahori in Snake Park, Soweto. The teen is alleged to have been part of a group who set upon a shop kept by Somali national Senosi Yusuf. Mahori died when Yusuf allegedly opened fire on the group.

Dan Mokwena, a 74-year-old Malawian shopkeeper, was attacked and killed as he slept in his shop on January 21. The *Star* reports that on the same day, a 19-year-old was shot in Naledi, Soweto, and declared dead on arrival at hospital. The youth, Nhlanhla Monareng, was a bystander when police fired into a crowd gathered at a Pakistani-owned shop.

A baby was trampled to death when a crowd fled from a shop they had just looted in Kagiso. The group rammed into a young woman who was carrying the baby. “In that commotion, the baby fell and was trampled by the fleeing mob,” said SAPS’s Lt.-Gen. Solomon Makgale.

Another bystander, 61-year-old Hendrick Manye, died when a foreign spaza-owner fired at a crowd stoning the shopkeeper’s premises in Swaneville, west of Johannesburg, on January 22. According to SABC News, African National Congress (ANC) veteran

Winnie Madikizela-Mandela said on a visit to Manye’s relatives that it did not make sense for South Africans to attack shops owned by foreign nationals, whom they accused of taking away jobs.

Deputy Minister in the Presidency Buti Manamela said the looting cannot be justified. Manamela, national secretary of the Young Communist League, the youth wing of the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP), said young people claimed they looted foreign-owned shops to protect the economy of townships like Soweto. “We should stand up and say, not in our name,” he blustered. “Crime is crime. You cannot justify it.”

Such statements are worthless. Manamela and Madikizela-Mandela have still stuck to the script of the ruling tripartite alliance (the ANC, SACP and the Congress of South African Trade Unions) by insisting at every turn that the violence is merely criminal and not xenophobic. This is, in turn, an attempt to cover up the scandalous response of the ruling party to a previous outbreak of xenophobia.

Beginning in settlements like Diepsloot, north of Johannesburg, residents launched an orgy of looting, raping and killing directed against foreign traders in 2008. Many of them—in some cases refugees from war and repression seeking sanctuary in South Africa—lost their homes and livelihoods to the mobs. The government blamed criminal elements for the violence.

But in addition to declassed and desperate elements, there is a petty bourgeois element of South African spaza owners who benefit from anti-immigrant violence. South African traders have had difficulty in competing against foreign nationals, who live frugally, pool their resources, buy in bulk, and are thus able to offer township residents lower prices for staples and other necessities. Foreign shopkeepers thereby save

customers the expense of catching a taxi to a mall or centrally located discounter. They are also known to offer goods on credit to regular customers.

All this is anathema to local black shopkeepers. It also goes against the ANC government's policy of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), which explicitly excludes foreign nationals and is limited only to South African blacks, preferably members of the ruling party.

BEE is an anti-poor, bourgeois nationalist policy. With its extensions, affirmative action and preferential procurement, it relies on the wealthy middle classes and the most backward working-class elements to turn South African workers against their foreign compatriots. In this way, the ruling class seeks to build support for an economic policy that produces nothing but a thin layer of wealthy blacks whose existence depends on the redoubled exploitation of black workers.

With the breakdown of the global capitalist system since 2008, the government is under pressure to stem the tide of immigration into South Africa, which has the third highest number of asylum seekers, after the United States and Germany. According to Clementine Salami, Southern Africa Regional Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, asylum seekers in South Africa come mostly from Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia.

The Supreme Court of Appeal ruled last September that there is no law preventing refugees and asylum seekers from getting licences to operate South African spazas. Judge Mohammed Navsa, in delivering the verdict, chided the SAPS and the government, warning them to “guard against unwittingly fuelling xenophobia.”

There is nothing unwitting about the anti-immigrant intentions of the ANC government and those organs of the state it controls. The Supreme Court of Appeal judgment concerned Operation Hard Stick, an SAPS initiative which saw 600 spazas closed in Limpopo province, including licenced ones.

“The appellants asserted that the police often extort bribes and do not act against South African owned businesses, who are similarly not licence-compliant,” according to the Supreme Court ruling.

In the current xenophobic outbreak, various media

outlets published photos of SAPS members loitering outside spazas in the process of being looted. The SAPS says it is investigating those officers.

Anti-immigrant looting and violence have since spread to Diepsloot and Alexandra, north of Johannesburg. Television news broadcaster eNCA reports that Gauteng police said a spaza in Alexandra was torched in the early hours of January 26. By then, 178 suspects (including children later released) had been arrested, 83 had appeared in the Protea Magistrates' Court, and 95 were to appear in court on the same day.



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