

Wave of anti-immigrant violence strikes South Africa amid deepening economic crisis

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Beginning on September 1, a wave of xenophobic riots in South Africa swept the cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria, leaving at least ten dead and scores injured, as foreign-owned businesses were looted and set afire. Gangs armed with axes and machetes poured into immigrant residential areas and carried out numerous assaults against South Africa's working-class immigrant population.

South African media reported that the catalyst for the eruption of violence was the previous week's alleged killing of a South African taxi driver by a Nigerian national in Pretoria. Stoking the campaign of xenophobic hysteria and outrage, several media outlets reported the accused killer was a drug trafficker. Several Nigerians living in Pretoria were beaten, scores of Nigerian-owned shops and businesses were torched and looted, and several cars were set afire and destroyed.

A Nigerian business owner gave an interview with the BBC after his shop was ransacked by looters, telling the reporter of the media's promotion of a hysterical campaign against migrants, "Foreign nationals are [being] subjected to a lot of allegations and lies."

Promising a violent crackdown, state security forces spilled into the streets firing tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades to quell the unrest. Hundreds have been arrested since the violence began.

With South Africa's migrant population in a state of terror, the wave of attacks has led thousands foreign nationals to flee their homes for makeshift refugee camps set up by police, with many immigrants declaring their desire to leave the country permanently.

Kadiye Mohammad, a store owner from Somalia and a nine-year resident of Johannesburg, told Bloomberg: "My fear is dying from being beaten. That is no way to

die, especially at the hands of your fellow Africans. I ask myself what we have done to make them so angry."

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa delivered completely empty rhetoric during a televised address, condemning the wave of attacks and feigning concern for immigrants. Cynically, he called the attacks "unacceptable," saying that xenophobia "is something that is completely against the ethos that we as South Africans espouse."

He continued, shedding crocodile tears for the victims of the violence, "Over the past few days, our country has been deeply traumatised and troubled by acts of violence and criminality directed against foreign nationals and our own citizens."

Ramaphosa's concern for immigrants is a fraud. The African National Congress, along with sections of the ruling class, have played a significant role over the years in stoking anti-immigrant poison and bigotry, seeking to scapegoat immigrants as the cause for the nation's economic malaise.

Just in January, the ANC called for "tough new measures" against immigrants and proposed "tougher border control." Explicitly targeting immigrants, the ANC introduced plans in March to use drones in patrolling the nation's borders to intercept "illegal border crossings." Additionally, the ANC has called for the prosecution of employers who hire undocumented immigrants.

In calling for limiting immigration to the country, Ramaphosa declared that "effective border management is an important aspect of ensuring that the country and its people are safe."

Herman Mashaba, Democratic Alliance mayor of Johannesburg, one of the cities in which significant anti-immigrant violence occurred last week, provoked popular social outrage in November when he posted

several xenophobic messages to his Twitter account.

In one filthy tweet, Mashaba described foreigners as a threat to public health: “We are going to sit back and allow people like you to bring us Ebolas [sic] in the name of small business. Health of our people first. Our health facilities are already stretched to the limit.”

As a measure of the toxic anti-immigrant politics promoted by ruling elites internationally, abetted by their mouthpieces in the media, the wave of xenophobic violence in South Africa has provoked a series of attacks against South African immigrants in other countries across the continent.

In Nigeria, after reports of Nigerian nationals being targeted in South Africa were disseminated in the media, attacks were carried out against South Africans in capital city Lagos, in which two Shoprite stores, a South African-based shopping mall chain with locations across the continent, were looted and suffered significant damage, prompting the chain to temporarily close down all stores nationwide.

In Lusaka, Zambia, university students stormed the South African embassy in protest, torching the embassy’s sign. South African immigrants were also targeted in Lusaka, with various foreign-operated shops set afire.

Heightening diplomatic tensions on the continent, Nigeria recalled its ambassador to South Africa last week and, in a tit-for-tat, South Africa closed its missions in Lagos and Abuja. Popular Nigerian musicians Burna Boy and Tiwa Savage were joined with professional athletes from across the continent in announcing a boycott against performing in South Africa to protest the recent spate of xenophobic violence.

The roots for the violence lie in the South African ruling elite, embodied in the ANC government, which is facing growing hostility from the South African masses since coming to power at the end of apartheid in 1994. Mired in a deep economic crisis, South Africa is wracked with a chronically high unemployment rate of nearly 30 percent, with joblessness among youth even higher, at 50 percent.

In preparation of the inevitable eruption of social revolt against its criminal rule, the ANC government is deploying the military along with xenophobia in an effort to divide and suppress the working class.

Utilizing the xenophobic violence in Johannesburg

and Pretoria as a pretext, on Tuesday the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) announced that it had deployed troops to parts of Gauteng province. A spokesperson for Gauteng Premier David Makhura stated that provincial police forces had received assurances from SANDF for assistance in quelling violent unrest.

Making clear the deployment of troops against the civilian population is part of the overall drive to crush social opposition, the deployment follows July’s commitment of SANDF forces to the streets of Capetown with a declared mission of “combating crime.”

The ANC ruling government has presided over a vast increase in social inequality and sharp increase in poverty, exposing the hollow promises of “black capitalism” as a solution to the problems confronting the working class and poor in South Africa. The elite at the top of post-Apartheid South Africa have become immensely wealthy, embodied most clearly in President Ramaphosa, who claims a net worth in excess of 6.5 billion rand (US\$450 million). Meanwhile, more than half the population of South Africa, some 30 million people, subsist on less than 992 rand (\$68) per month.



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