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PRESS STATEMENT

The Violence is Not Behind Us: CoRMSA requests investigation into 2008 Attacks

The Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA) has formally requested the South African Human Commission to convene a collaborative investigation by the various Chapter 9 institutions into the mob violence that shocked South Africa in 2008. In May, violence targeting foreign nationals and South Africans reached unprecedented levels resulting in 62 deaths and tens of thousands of people being displaced.

Despite condemning the violence, the government has done little to address the structural and political causes for it. There has yet to be a substantive parliamentary investigation, nor has there been a presidential commission of inquiry. While the violence occurred in front of media cameras, almost no one has been prosecuted for murder or assault. As a result, anti-foreigner violence continues, albeit at a lower level. With national elections on the horizon, there is an urgent need to ensure that political mobilisation does not result—as it has repeatedly—in attacks on foreigners or other ‘outsiders’.

To prevent a reoccurrence of the violence, it is necessary to identify and address the root causes. Research to be released in January 2009 finds that the lack of legitimate elected leadership is behind much of the violence. In many areas local leaders were actively involved in fuelling the violence and therefore their involvement in strategies to address xenophobia is of grave concern. Unless these leaders are held accountable, they will continue to base their campaigns and positions on an agenda of hate and violence. As the deaths of more than 20 South Africans during the May attacks illustrate, not only foreigners are at risk. Before long, Pedis, Shangaans, Vendas, or anyone ‘undesirable’ may be attacked.

In the words of assassinated American Senator, Robert F. Kennedy, we have learned to “to look at our brothers as aliens, men with whom we share a city, but not a community; men bound to us in common dwelling, but not in common effort. We learn to share only a common fear, only a common desire to retreat from each other, only a common impulse to meet disagreement with force.” Something must be done.

To this end, CoRMSA has requested a “serious public and high-level inquiry into the attacks and the responses to them”. The time has come to end our culture of violence

and impunity. Unless we take action now, we will all be at risk. CoRMSA has requested a response by 15th January 2009.

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The Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA) is the South African national network of refugee and migrant service providers. It is mandated to co-ordinate the national network and advocate on behalf of its member organisations to bring about social change. Its members are Amnesty International, Black Sash, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Christians for Peace in Africa, Co-ordinating Body of Refugee Communities, Durban Refugee Service Providers Network, Forced Migration Studies Programme, Jesuit Refugee Service, Lawyers for Human Rights, Musina Legal Advice Office, Refugee Children's Project, Refugee Ministries Centre, Refugee Pastoral Care, South African Red Cross, Southern African Centre for the Survivors of Torture, Tutumike Network, University of Cape Town Law Clinic and University of Witwatersrand Law Clinic. For more information, please visit www.cormsa.org.za.