

Government Gets Lowest Rating on Xenophobia

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The recent death of two Somali traders in Cape Town, lack of a national action plan to fight xenophobia, lack of a centralised system for monitoring and recording xenophobic violence, and an attack on Zimbabwean nationals in Polokwane, are some of the reasons SA received the lowest rating in the APRM Monitoring Project report

In a week that saw two Somali traders shot dead in Cape Town and two more in Port Elizabeth, the South African government's handling of xenophobia received the lowest possible rating in a report by the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) Monitoring Project.

Three years after widespread violence against foreigners broke out across the country, evaluators from the Monitoring Project noted that the government had failed to prioritise the issue, and that "there is even an element of denialism on the part of some officials."

Tara Polzer Ngwato, of the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS) at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, agreed with the assessment. "Government responses have been fragmented, poorly-resourced and with limited political commitment," despite a significant rise in attacks on foreign-owned shops in several provinces since the beginning of 2011.

The African Union introduced the APRM in 2003 as an instrument for improving governance and accountability. After agreeing to participate, countries identify their weaknesses and develop a National Programme of Action (NPOA) to address them.

The Monitoring Project, made up of civil society researchers and activists from the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), the Africa Governance Monitoring and Advocacy Project (AfriMAP), and the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), evaluated the government's track record on implementing its NPOA, and graded its progress on critical government issues.

Green is the highest rating, orange indicates some progress, and red little or no progress. Xenophobia was among seven areas given a red rating with others including corruption, poverty and unemployment. Successful management of elections got the only green rating.

Government initiatives fall short

South Africa's NPOA did not mention xenophobia, but a section in an official review of APRM implementation released in January 2011 covered government actions to address the issue, including setting up a unit to counter xenophobia and a communications programme to promote greater harmony between citizens and foreign nationals.

However, the Monitoring Project report described the section as "poorly written with inadvertent repetition and... clearly assembled in a hurry".

Several of the initiatives it listed have not been sustained or rolled out nationally; one, the Counter-Xenophobia Unit in the Department of Home Affairs, got off to "a bright start" according to the report, but "appears to have lost momentum".

Sicel'mpilo Shange-Buthane, director of the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA), told IRIN that after doing some initial awareness-raising, the group had been renamed the Integration and Repatriation Unit, but under new leadership in the Home Affairs Department it had been reluctant to implement xenophobia-related programmes.

Polzer Ngwato commented that the Unit was severely understaffed, and the new name had narrowed its mandate to dealing only with refugees and asylum seekers.

An Inter-Ministerial Committee on Xenophobia, set up after the 2008 attacks, is no longer active and the drafting of a National Action Plan to address xenophobia started in 2009 has still not been finalised. "Various departments are involved in social cohesion campaigns but there's no coordination in terms of what they're doing," said Shange-Buthane.

Political leaders implicated

There is no centralised system for monitoring and recording xenophobic violence, but in the first quarter of 2011 the Human Sciences Research Council tracked 20 deaths, 40 injuries, 200 foreign-owned shops looted and thousands displaced. One recent incident – the beating and stoning to death of a Zimbabwean national in an informal settlement outside Polokwane in Limpopo Province - was followed by the arrest of a local ward councillor affiliated with the African National Congress party for allegedly inciting the attack.

Local government officials have been implicated in several similar attacks in the last two years. Research by ACMS has identified competition for political and economic power in local communities as a key trigger of violence against foreigners.

"There are... many political leaders, along with much of the general population, who perceive foreigners to be a direct threat to citizen economic empowerment and service access, even though there is no evidence that this is in fact the case," said Polzer Ngwato, noting recent comments by Maggie Maunye, who chairs the parliamentary oversight committee of the Department of Home Affairs.

The Star newspaper, reported that during a briefing Maunye asked Home Affairs officials how much longer South Africa was going to allow foreigners to enter the country. "Is it not going to affect our resources, the economy of the country?" she was reported as saying.

"Here we have people who are living in poverty daily, people who are unemployed. We've never enjoyed our freedom as South Africans - we got it in 1994, and we had floods of refugees or undocumented people in the country."

Tina Ghelli, spokesperson for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in South Africa, said a Protection Working Group, set up by civil society groups and UNHCR to provide an early warning system for potential xenophobic violence, worked closely with the South African Police Service's Visible Policing Unit and had experienced some success in preventing attacks.

"They have been more responsive than in the past, but it hasn't trickled down to the local police everywhere," she told IRIN. "One of the big issues is... impunity - people think if they do something to a foreigner there are no repercussions."

In a list of recommendations to the now inactive Inter-Ministerial Committee in June 2010, CoRMSA urged better access to justice for victims of xenophobic violence. "Perpetrators are often not held accountable, which results in a perception of impunity for crimes against foreign nationals."

The APRM Monitoring Project report concludes that failing to address xenophobia in South Africa's NPoA "indicates the ambivalence of government in recognizing and dealing with the issue as a priority, and in a systematic way. The disastrous consequences of May 2008 and subsequent outbreaks of violence are further testimony of this."

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