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THE South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) has acceded to a request to investigate the causes of last year's wave of xenophobic violence.

The Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in SA (Cormsa) called last month for a probe into the attacks on foreigners, citing rumours of planned violence against migrants in the lead-up to this year's elections.

SAHRC chairman Jodi Kollapen said the organisation would spearhead an investigation into the causes of last year's attacks with a view to preventing a recurrence. However, the SAHRC was still to meet Cormsa and other organisations to work out the logistics and time frames.

Results of a study to be released this month by the University of the Witwatersrand's (Wits's) Forced Migration Studies Programme accuse unelected community leaders in last year's violence that killed 62 people, 20 of them South Africans. Thousands were displaced. Cormsa said indications that some municipal councillors were using anti-foreigner feelings to campaign for leadership were raising fears that South African ethnic minorities could be at risk.

Despite condemning the attacks on foreigners last year, the government has done little to address the "structural and political causes", Cormsa said. In addition, there was yet to be a substantive parliamentary investigation, nor had there been a presidential commission of inquiry.

Cormsa took the government to court last year in an attempt to prevent the closure of several temporary shelters set up for displaced foreigners in Gauteng.

The shelters have since been closed except one established in Pretoria's Acacia area by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, mainly to accommodate people with refugee status.

Bishop Paul Verryn of the Central Methodist Church, along with Mary Metcalfe, head of the Wits School of Education, are involved in mediation efforts to facilitate the re-integration or repatriation of refugees in the Pretoria shelter.

About 500 people, including 50 children, were living in dire conditions without toilets. "People are sick and hungry," Metcalfe said.

The mediation was meant to "allow people to understand their options in terms of repatriation, resettlement and re-integration and to be supported in terms of that choice," she said.