



Fear lurks between a rock and a hard place

By Maureen Isaacson

It is called fear - this emotion that has seized the country.

In the wake of xenophobic violence, fear stalks the temporary refugee shelter in Corlett Gardens as it stalks the current debate: repatriation or reintegration?

"I cannot go back to where I was living" - Kisto Mugova, a Zimbabwean, voices the feelings of all. "We're very scared, we don't know their faces."

In the weeks following the violent attacks in Alexandra township on May 11 that then spread across the country, everybody I speak to is afraid. This includes South Africans who fear that the mob will turn on them for reasons of ethnicity or that the foreigners in their employ will be routed out.

The fear is expressed in the Bakongo immigrant's lament, made popular here by Simao Kikamba; the Angolan writer. A mono nkondolo *yaya kani va mpambu nzila/ Lufwa lua nkandi mono* translates roughly as "I have lost my brother, lost like at a crossroad, /Dying like a nut between two rocks (between a rock and a hard place)".

Among my interviewees are the documented and the undocumented; erstwhile businessmen and carpenters who are now car guards; blind beggars, restaurant owners and university professors - lumped together into a new amorphous grouping called "foreigners".

Taking cues from the government's slow and inept documentation of non-nationals and the manner in which they have been associated with criminality, job stealing and disease, we have created a new category of "unpeople". Who are these "non-nationals", then?

Loren Landau, the director of the Forced Migration Project at the University of the Witwatersrand, says nobody knows precisely who they are. At present, South Africa deports more than a quarter of a million non-nationals per year, yet has no comprehensive system to account for who these people are.

The department of home affairs lists Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Malawi and Somalia as the main countries of origin.

But there are also asylum seekers, not only from Africa, but from 54 countries around the world, who are drawn to South Africa because they are allowed to work while their papers are being processed. Nonetheless, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that of the 5 879 asylum cases reviewed by government officers in 2007, some 29 percent of applicants received refugee status and 71 percent of cases were rejected.

That South Africa offers opportunities but no guarantees is no secret to the men - there are only men here - who have been taken to Corlett Gardens from the Alexandra police station, where last week they worried about the cold, wet concrete floors in the mens' tent that had no floor covering.

Today, there is only praise for the watertight UN tents. Trust Moyo and Shakes Baneng, both Zimbabweans, say the Salvation Army meals are good - but Victor Sebele, a school principal, who was hounded out of Zimbabwe before coming to South Africa in 2004 to work as a gardener, longs for a light by which to read at night.

Other complaints: the absence of hot water and, shockingly, that clothes donated by concerned citizens have been stolen by assistants. And then there are the neighbours who endorsed the rejection of the past weeks by greeting the men with placards and hysteria: "Go home! Get out!"

It is chilly and the approach of evening brings memories of sticks and spears, axes and shouting - and the persistent image of "the flaming man", Ernesto Nhamuave.

Burnt alive in Ramaphosa on the East Rand on May 18, his remains were buried in his Mozambican village of Vuca this week. Manuel Mathola, a waiter who says he lives in fear in Hillbrow and has sent his children home to Mozambique, says the government's apology to that country has come too late.

Everywhere, in temporary shelters and outside of them, people take stabs at the meaning of the violence, too often it is psychobabble and invariably conversation turns to the government's ineptitude.

Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, the home affairs minister, said at this week's parliamentary briefing that "we need wide consultation".

Idasa's newly released report, based on an investigation of the violence in several affected communities, reveals that the resentment of those who drove the mayhem was based on poverty and poor service delivery, rather than a political agenda. These feelings were widespread, even among those who did not participate, says the report.

It also says that the violence - which focused largely on informal settlements and trade - looked as if it was orchestrated, which does not mean that it was.

Rather, it was the result of "a decentralised community organising".

But there was a pattern in many communities. A first group, comprised of instigators, targeted foreigners and a second group joined in opportunistically, revelling in the looting. The instigators, Idasa, found, were largely hostel dwellers. Strong local government institutions, where they existed, apparently mitigated violence.

But as the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (Cormsa) reports, local government failed to respond to warnings of imminent conflict and failed to call for assistance from provincial and national departments.

Piers Pigou, the director of the South African History Archives, asks: who benefits from the violence? He speculates that Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's Zanu-PF party stands to benefit from the destabilisation of the Zimbabwean community in South Africa, in particular, prior to the run off elections.

He says that while the inference drawn from the Idasa report - that the violence was an organic explosion - is not implausible, it is possible that external elements have provoked the instigators.

Such issues are under discussion at Kin Malebo, a Congolese bar in Yeoville, Johannesburg. Although it is common cause that Yeoville's dense population of non-nationals has kept the perpetrators of violence at bay, the people outside the bars run by Zimbabweans and Nigerians across the road are watchful. Inside the

bar, the beer flows and Papa Wemba sings Viva La Musica.

"Jean", a Congolese veterinarian who lectures at Pretoria University, and who does not want his surname published, says he is one of 10 animal scientists in the country who has a PhD.

"I came to South Africa 16 years ago and I teach and organise funding for my students and train small- scale farmers in disease control: now this."

Florent Kiwete, a Congolese human rights lawyer who came to South Africa last year, says: "The locals say the foreigners take their jobs, their daughters, their wives but since so many thousands have fled the country, how many jobs are available? The government pretends it does not know what is going on."

Despite President Thabo Mbeki's denial that he had intelligence of the imminent xenophobic crisis - this was contradicted by Charles Nqakula, the safety and security minister, who said that he was aware of tensions directed against foreigners around issues of service delivery. We all know that the violence has long been cooking in townships, sparked often by isolated incidents.

Cormsa's report reveals that on January 8 this year in Shoshanguve, four non-nationals broke into a spaza shop and one of the suspects was allegedly burned alive. In Duncan Village in the Eastern Cape, also on January 8, two Somalis were burned to death in their shop.

Almost everybody can tell you that a scarcity of resources has created rivalry about everything from an low-cost house to a piece of bread. The Cormsa report also says that the government's tolerance of xenophobia and its obvious lack of control over the influx of foreigners is seen as empowering for the instigators.

Cormsa says that despite repeated calls, the South African government remains unable to address the humanitarian needs of the displaced and has failed to coordinate even the most basic framework to assist those coming across borders.

It says the UNHCR and the Human Rights Commission (HRC) "have stood by in relative silence" as Zimbabweans continue to be rounded up and sent down the repatriation tunnel at Lindela Repatriation Centre in Krugersdorp.

But Jody Kollapen, the chairperson of the HRC, says that it has litigated on Lindela in respect of illegal detentions and has produced a comprehensive report in this regard, with recommendations.

In its defence, the HRC has limited resources, an extensive mandate and its response to the violence has been swift and effective.

But Lindela remains a shameful centre of abuse. In September 2005, Mapisa-Nqakula invited a UN working group on arbitrary detention to South Africa to discuss the high death rate at Lindela.

When I visited the centre in September 2006 the atmosphere was poisonous. It was three months after 58 Congolese nationals, who had protested against their protracted detention, were allegedly attacked by officers from Bossassa - Lindela's contracted security firm and also responsible for its accommodation and catering.

Access to health services is inconsistent at Lindela, as it is for non-nationals elsewhere in the country. Doctor Mohammed Said Khota, who was the sole doctor on duty at the time of my visit, and on 24-hour standby, admitted that many people died but pointed out that more than 100 people visit the clinic daily.

Cormsa suggests a step to make life less desperate for those seeking refuge: a regional work permit, which will make non-nationals legal and allow them to join

unions, access banks and promote the "social integration" that the government touts.

But last month Mbeki said it was not necessary to revisit South Africa's legislation governing immigration and asylum. He has insisted that the country's policies have always promoted the peaceful integration of non-nationals.

What is required, in his view, is better policing and tolerance - the famous "education of the poor", against which the poor are railing.

If we continue to close our ears to their protests and to the cry of the Bakongo immigrant's song, our worst fears will be realised.

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