



'Government inaction is fuelling xenophobia'

Attacks on foreigners living in South Africa are nothing new - they've been going on for over 10 years - and experts warn the government's failure to act decisively has simply fuelled the xenophobia.

This week the media, politicians and aid organisations poured into Alexandra township in Sandton following the bloody attacks, murder and rape of foreigners. The violence followed multiple countrywide attacks.

"This is not a new phenomenon - it's been happening for some time. But it has never been given the due attention it deserves," said Dr Emmanuel Nyakarashi of the Johannesburg-based Refugee Ministries Centre.

Fifteen countrywide mob attacks on foreigners have taken place since December in Gauteng, the North West, Eastern Cape, the Free State and the Western Cape.

The Somalian Association of SA has recorded 471 fatalities in 11 years. And Human Rights Watch warned of "alarming" increases in anti-foreigner feelings since 1998.

"The government response toward the current influx of foreigners into SA has groomed xenophobia," said Nyakarashi.

The government had not clearly acknowledged the foreigners and had failed to create awareness about South Africa's international obligations, he said. Backlogged systems to process new arrivals were a further challenge.

"The whole agenda of the government is to make these people invisible and that's a dangerous route that fuels xenophobia. The government still wants to pretend these people are not here," said Nyakarashi.

"It's high time that they wake up and confront the situation."

Ethnic or tribal attacks could follow the violence on foreigners, he warned.

"Trust me, after the foreigners it will be something else. It boils down to the weakest link. If I was the government I would not underestimate the message being sent here."

This week, a report by the ANC in Alexandra to Johannesburg mayor Amos Masondo included a rumour that the attacks had started near hostels that were a stronghold of the IFP.

Bloody clashes between members of the two parties claimed many lives in the run-up to the 1994 election.

Sicel'mpilo Shange-Buthane, of the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in SA (Cormsa), said ethnicity had arisen in similar recent attacks in Atteridgeville, a mostly Sotho-speaking area, with reports of Nguni language speakers being chased away.

Crime, job-poaching and housing allocations have been blamed for the violence. But Cormsa said issues of poor service delivery, lax law enforcement and lack of faith in formal structures to resolve grievances had contributed to the vigilante action.

The government's reaction to xenophobia had always been reactionary and without depth, said Shange-Buthane. Home Affairs had often only taken action when forced by litigation, she added.

Earlier this week Cormsa disputed comments by Safety and Security Minister Charles Nqakula that the attacks were not countrywide, which meant xenophobia was not a crisis.

"It is a problem, but I would never define it as a crisis," Nqakula said.

"It is a problem. A concern that we as government are very worried about."

Lawyers for Human Rights on Friday said arrests of xenophobia victims in Olifantsfontein on the East Rand had continued.

This was despite Home Affairs Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula's commitment that Alexandra victims would not be deported but reintegrated.

Xenophobia had affected many SA communities, the organisation said.

"It's unfortunate that this problem did not receive the government's attention until it arrived on the doorstep of SA's largest city."

This week the government announced a multi-department task team to probe the xenophobic attacks.

Shange-Buthane stressed that "real action" was needed.

"We don't want window-dressing. We support the idea of the task team but we want to see it working."

Last year the Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights slammed South Africa's migration policy for criminalising migration and fuelling xenophobia.

The report came days after police burst into the Central Methodist Church on a midnight raid and arrested hundreds of people. The Johannesburg High Court later apologised to those arrested.

South Africa is signatory to international legislation that protects asylum seekers and refugees. It also has solid internal immigration laws. However, the government had failed to explain SA's obligations to citizens, said Nyakarashi.

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