



Police deploy specialists

"We will burn the Shangaans if they don't go back," were the chilling words of a 25-year old man arrested for public violence in Ramaphosa on the East Rand on Monday as police deployed specialists to stop the xenophobic attacks that have left at least 22 people dead in the last week.

"We will fight for this country. We will keep on going, they can't stop us," said the man, speaking to reporters through the bars of holding cell at the Reiger Park police station.

By Monday morning 217 people have been arrested for the attacks, which police director Govindsamy Mariemuthoo attributed to criminality.

He said this could be seen by the types of crimes being committed: rape, robbery and housebreaking among them.

However, the man, who cannot be identified until he appears in court, said: "We just want them to give up and leave us alone in our country. That will be enough.

"We don't want to fight, but we will burn the Shangaans if they don't go back." He was referring to the Tsonga-speaking group of people, mostly hailing from Limpopo and Mozambique.

He said he was proud of destroying a few shacks in the area.

"I will be proud to meet the man who started this," he said.

The man, who is unemployed, said, "Foreigners are taking our jobs and our wives," and blamed government for letting them into South Africa.

"A lot them don't have a passport but I am the one in jail," he said, pointing at the group of adults and children who sat among piles of suitcases and furniture outside the police station.

He said his "brother" was arrested for burning foreigners in Ramaphosa township.

Also speaking from his cell, this man claimed foreigners were the cause of the crime situation in Africa.

"No more. They must go. The Shangaans must go."

Earlier, police recovered the hacked body parts of a Malawian national on a sandy road in Ramaphosa township and, near Primrose, one person with Mozambican identify papers in his pocket was found dead and two other Mozambicans were seriously beaten.

In Zamimpilo, outside Riverlea on the West Rand, at least 50 shacks were burned and foreign nationals in the area taken to safety in a community centre.

In Kya Sands, an industrial area close to informal settlements, groups of people began throwing stones at each other after a community meeting, but the situation

was brought under control, said spokesman Superintendent Lungelo Dlamini.

In the Jerusalem informal settlement, near Boksburg, police came under fire as they tried to stop a group of about 500 people from looting shops there.

As evening approached in Reiger Park, local residents served tea and coffee to people seeking refuge and offered them accommodation for the night in their homes.

The engines of bakkies loaded with furniture belonging to people of Zimbabwean and Mozambican origin idled outside, preparing to leave the area.

Entire families camped outside -- women with babies on their backs, and young children who had been forced to skip school.

The Red Cross and the St Vincent's Anglican church next door helped provide shelter and aid.

At least 10,000 foreigners are taking shelter at community centres on the East Rand, said Ekurhuleni Metro spokesman Zweli Dlamini.

"The figures are escalating as people run for their dear lives," said Dlamini.

Ambulances are "driving up and down," he said, and clinics are on alert to deal with violence, as well as the medical needs of the displaced.

A joint operations centre has been set up in Bedfordview to co-ordinate humanitarian needs.

Responding to the Democratic Alliance's criticism that the government's disaster response has been slow and basic requirements like toilets were not adequate, Dlamini said they would order more toilets and other necessities.

A consortium of NGOs also criticised government's response, saying it was inadequate and the situation needed to be treated as a state of emergency.

The Treatment Action Campaign, saying that antiretroviral programmes should not be disrupted, "reluctantly" joined the call for the army to intervene.

A statement from acting National Police Commissioner Tim Williams' office said that after a meeting of top police officials on Monday, it was decided to deploy additional members with "experience and training in reacting to medium to high risk situations" in Gauteng.

Williams also thanked the police who had been working to try to control the situation under "extremely stressful conditions" and called on community leaders to help by talking within the communities they serve.

President Thabo Mbeki's spokesperson Mukhoni Ratshitanga said the president was "very concerned" by developments and reiterated a call for the violence to stop.

"We are taking these things very seriously," he said.

Meanwhile, Rose Molape, a resident and a South African citizen, expressed anger over what had happened to her Zimbabwean neighbours in Ramaphosa, where she has lived for the last 13 years.

"They were nice people and they had to leave. They have been living here for so long and now all of a sudden things are happening," said Molape.

She said the Zimbabwean family's home was burnt down after they left.

"We as Africans need to help each other, we can't do this," she said. - Sapa

Published on the Web by IOL on 2008-05-19 17:00:19

© Independent Online 2005. All rights reserved. IOL publishes this article in good faith but is not liable for any loss or damage caused by reliance on the information it contains.