

## Recent attacks just the tip of a xenophobic iceberg

**Francois Rank, Suthentira Govender and Philani Nombembe**

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More foreigners in South Africa are being attacked than ever before, in a wave of xenophobic violence that has sent hundreds fleeing for their lives.

Since 2005, there have been 16 reported attacks on foreign residents throughout the country — most of which have occurred in the past six months.

Research by the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (Cormsa), shows that, in the past six weeks alone, four attacks occurred in the Gauteng townships of Alexandra, Diepsloot and Mamelodi.

An advocacy group in Durban, the KwaZulu-Natal Refugee Council, reports that more than a dozen xenophobic attacks, in which at least two foreigners were killed, have taken place since the beginning of the year.

Council head Pierre Matate says that, at a meeting in the Durban inner city area of Albert Park this week, South Africans demanded that foreigners leave the area.

“They accused us of being criminals, of being smelly and of taking their jobs.”

In March, seven people, including Zimbabweans, Pakistanis and a Somali, were killed after their shops and shacks were set alight in Atteridgeville outside Pretoria.

In Diepsloot, north of Johannesburg, there have been two major attacks this year, including those of the past week, in which seven foreigners were seriously injured.

On January 8, there were three attacks around the country, including two in the Eastern Cape towns of Jeffreys Bay and East London, in which two Somali shop owners were murdered.

The same day in Soshanguve, north of Pretoria, a foreign man was burnt to death after being accused of burgling a spaza shop.

Ahmed Dawlo, the chairman of the Somali Association of South Africa, says 471 Somalis have been murdered here since 1997.

Cormsa’s head, Loren Landau, said the consortium had noticed a dramatic increase in the number of attacks on migrants.



Face Off: Police use pepper spray on a man, suspected of taking part in xenophobic attacks, who resisted arrest. Picture: Simphiwe Nkwali

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"About two years ago, Somalis were attacked in Masiphumelele on the Cape Flats. That wasn't the first, but since then we have seen a steady acceleration in the number of attacks on foreigners," he said.

Landau, also the director of the Forced Migration Studies Programme at Wits University, said although there were foreigners involved in crime, "there is no evidence that they are in any way responsible for the surge we have seen in national crime rates".

"In fact, some surveys have suggested only 2% to 3% of arrests involve migrants . If anything, foreigners seem under- represented in crime."

On Wednesday, Home Affairs Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa- Nqakula told Parliament's home affairs committee that a "third force" could be behind the violence because people who had lived together for many years were suddenly at each other's throats.

Landau, however, says there is almost always an economic reason for xenophobic attacks.

"We have seen competition among shopkeepers and among taxi owners who use gangsters and others to mobilise mobs against foreigners."

David Cote of Lawyers for Human Rights said on Friday that his organisation was concerned about how government had handled recent incidents.

Landau said his organisation "never thought" xenophobic violence would happen in Alexandra "because these people have been living there for 20, 30 years".

"Now we see it can. This is why we want to see a national response, not just a public condemnation, involving councillors and police in every township in SA." — Additional reporting by Rowan Philp

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