

South Africa removes refugee camps but migrants fear a return to violence

Tue, Oct 14, 2008

Aid workers and immigrants say the government has done little to tackle hostility towards foreigners that boiled over in the spring, writes Karin Brulliard in Akasia, South Africa

MOHAMMED RAGE lived here among the dusty tents outside the nation's capital, Pretoria, for one month. At 48, the Somali shopkeeper had been considered an elder among hundreds of immigrants who sought refuge in this government-run encampment after brutal attacks against foreigners spread through South Africa's slums in the spring.

This week, a photo of Rage's bloodied dead body on a mortuary table was offered by those he left behind as proof that they could not leave this camp, even though it was being shut. He had returned to his looted shop in June, they said, and got shot in the chest.

"I am afraid that everywhere I go, I will be killed," said Rage's son, Abdullah Mohammed Rage (24), clutching the photograph, as government-deployed security workers used crowbars to tear down nearby tents made of blankets and wooden planks. "In South Africa, there is no place safe."

Five months have passed since more than 60 people were killed in anti-foreigner beatings and burnings that shocked a nation that touts diversity. Thousands of immigrants moved to about 10 refugee-style camps that seemed incongruous in Africa's most developed country. In recent weeks, the government has torn most down, saying the neighbourhoods are safe again.

But aid workers, along with immigrants who fled to this spot north of Pretoria - mostly Somalis, Ethiopians and Congolese - disagree. They say the length of time the camps have stayed in place and continued reports of violence underscore how little the South African government has done to tackle a long-standing hostility toward immigrants that reached a tipping point in the spring.

Although government leaders condemned the attacks and quickly set up the camps, they have mostly left it to civic groups to distribute aid and grants to help the displaced to get back on their feet. Some critics say the issue of the immigrants' plight has fallen to the wayside as the ruling African National Congress struggles with internal turmoil and courts the very voters in the townships that had lashed out at immigrants.

Others say government leaders simply seem paralysed by what a spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which had loaned 2,000 tents after the violence, called a "sense of shame".

"There hasn't been a comprehensive investigation or commission of inquiry into the violence . . . It appears that very little has changed," said Duncan Breen, an advocacy officer for the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa, which went to court to try to keep the camps open until the government made a plan to reintegrate the displaced. "That actually leads all of us to worry that violence could break out again."

Simon Zwane, a spokesman for the provincial government, which ran six camps near Johannesburg and Pretoria that have been shuttered, said the government has held seminars to "encourage tolerance" in

some communities.

Intermittent violence has continued against foreigners, particularly Somalis, many of whom are legal refugees and run shops in townships. On October 3rd, a Somali woman and her three children were stabbed and bludgeoned to death in Eastern Cape province, prompting the UN's top human rights official, Navanethem Pillay, to condemn "a dangerous pattern of targeted attacks on foreigners".

As the Akasia camp was dismantled on a recent afternoon, the dirt lot began to resemble a junkyard, with mattresses and piles of clothing. The hundreds of immigrants there said they were not budging. "People here have seen the worst of South Africa," said a Congolese woman with a baby strapped to her back. "It is better they kill us here than we go back and they kill us."

Despite its wrenching poverty, South Africa is among Africa's richest countries and a magnet for immigrants, who number three million to five million. They have come as mineworkers, refugees from conflicts and, in the case of millions of Zimbabweans, illegal immigrants escaping economic ruin at home.

Most of those killed in May were Zimbabwean and Mozambican, but by some accounts as many as one-third were South African.

Surveys over the past decade by the Southern African Migration Project have found that hostility toward outsiders is higher in South Africa than in most nations where comparable data exist.

In a recent report, the project said warnings by researchers and elected officials about the potential for violence were mostly ignored, leading to a "perfect xenophobic storm" this year. - (LA Times-Washington Post service)

© 2008 The Irish Times