



Xenophobia fear as election looms

By Ntokozo Mfusi and Wendy Jasson Da Costa

There were fears that South Africa could be heading for another round of xenophobic attacks on the same scale as last year's, or even larger, because of the looming elections, non-government organisations warned on Wednesday.

At least 60 people were killed and more than 1 446 charges were laid after last year's countrywide outbreak of xenophobia.

Duncan Breen, of the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa, said the organisation had asked the Human Rights Commission to investigate last year's attacks.

"The potential exists for it to happen again. We need to act," he said.

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He warned that xenophobia could become a big issue closer to the election because a report to be released later this month showed that many local leaders were mobilising support around the issue of foreigners.

Breen said little seemed to have been done to address the root cause of last year's violence. One of the key reasons was that foreigners were "taking" RDP houses, while the owners were actually renting to them.

The Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa is a network of refugee and migrant service providers for organisations like the Black Sash, Amnesty International and Lawyers for Human Rights.

According to Breen, although the large scale violence has subsided, attacks on foreigners have not stopped.

'The conditions which gave rise to the violence are still largely there'

Evidence was the recent attacks on Somalians in Port Elizabeth and several incidents in Gauteng.

Suren Pillay, of the Human Sciences Research Council, said studies indicated that the common factor in communities where xenophobia occurred was "profound dissatisfaction" with the government.

"The conditions which gave rise to the violence are still largely there," said Pillay.

Crime

It was crucial to take note of the sentiments expressed about foreigners. If the previous attacks were just criminal, then the targets of those attacks still had to be explained.

Both he and Breen said government communications needed to be improved

urgently because communities did not understand policy issues and how various allocations, like housing, were made.

However, despite this weekend's attacks on foreigners at Albert Park in Durban, which left three people dead after they were forced to jump from a building, authorities say it was not xenophobia, just a case of rooting out corruption and crime gone wrong.

Other victims said the mob had specifically asked if they were "amakwerekwere" (foreigners) before beating them.

At a meeting between the two parties to try to resolve the tensions, some of the culprits were pointed out. But despite CCTV footage of the attacks no arrests had been made, said Sarim Mwakalo, chairman of the Tanzanian Community Forum.

Albert Park councillor Vusi Khoza said there had been an influx of foreigners into the area since last year's xenophobic attacks, buildings were in a poor state and liquor outlets were flourishing.

"Bylaws are not respected or observed in the area and the municipality is not doing enough to ensure that they are enforced and followed. Bylaws on vagrants, overpopulating buildings and loitering are not followed," he said.

"The city says the issue of foreigners is not their responsibility but that of provincial and national government, but I feel someone has to get the ball rolling."

Municipal manager Michael Sutcliffe said foreign nationals were the responsibility of the national government, which had neglected KwaZulu-Natal and instead focused on Gauteng and Cape Town.

The National Prosecuting Authority's Tlali Tlali said many people had been prosecuted in connection with last year's attacks. Special courts had been established only in the Western Cape. Other cases were on the normal court rolls.

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