

FORUM:	Human Rights Council
ISSUE:	Measures to Address Xenophobia and Promote Social Cohesion in South Africa
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Introduction

In 2024 alone, 29 xenophobic incidents in South Africa have displaced at least 2,622 people. Despite the end of racial segregation, rampant socioeconomic inequality remains. This provides fertile ground for scapegoating and claims that immigrants are spreading disease and exacerbating crime in the globe’s fifth-most crime-ridden country (“Crime Rate”). Furthermore, the South African government’s failure to ensure basic services like electricity has sparked anti-immigrant groups to organize across the country, harassing immigrants and demanding mass deportation. Thus, to secure life and rights for all people, the Human Rights Council must extinguish the flames of South African xenophobia.

Background

Ironically, many xenophobic spokesmen posit a hard-won message of racial unity. For instance, a leader of the Put South Africans First movement called upon “South Africans of all races” to scour their country of immigrants and migrants (qtd. in Chotia). However, xenophobia is rooted in the racial and socioeconomic inequality raked by apartheid, a period from 1948 to 1994 where South Africa’s completely white government racially segregated their predominantly Black country (“AUHRM Project Focus Area”). Although apartheid only lasted for 46 years, white control began around 400 before when the Dutch East India Company docked in South Africa. Then, in the mid-19th century, descendants of Dutch colonists known as Boer Voortrekkers formed “white-ruled republics.” These became part of the Union of South Africa in 1910.

Under this “white union” (“History”), the government enacted apartheid by uprooting non-white South Africans from their city homes. They then crammed them into “tribal



Put South Africans First protestors

homelands” and townships, which were dingy, segregated housing usually at a city’s outskirts. The government also banned “interracial relationships,” Black suffrage, and the participation of Black people



in politics. Essentially, they diminished Black people “labour for the whites” (“AUHRM Project Focus Area”).

Despite the end of apartheid in 1990, de facto segregation and gaping inequalities in wages, education, and economic prosperity continue to run rampant (Office of the High Commissioner). These were exacerbated by government corruption and mismanagement under the African National Congress (ANC), the majority party in the South African parliament. The ANC also failed to address high rates of crime and violence, an “official unemployment rate...[of] 32%,” and a lack of “water, electricity...[and] proper housing” (Imray and Magome).

National elections in May 2024 overturned the ANC’s parliamentary majority, the first time since Apartheid’s 1994 demise. Although the ANC received 41% of the vote, a greater cut than any of their political rivals, they will be forced to negotiate with opponent parties to re-establish their majority (Imray and Magome). Thus, as the South African government establishes a fragile new order, dismantling xenophobia and nurturing social cohesion will be integral to mending old inequalities and encouraging people of all races and nations to thrive.

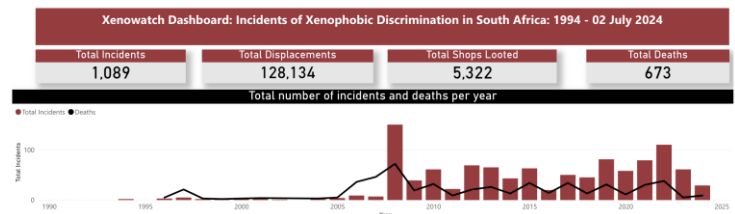
Problems Raised

Violence and Crime

In the past 30 years, xenophobic violence across South Africa has led to 673 deaths, 5,322 looted shops, and 128,134 displacements

(“Statistics Dashboard”). Property worth millions of dollars has also been destroyed (Dauda et al.). Many of these attacks occur “in townships and informal settlements,” reflecting the lasting effects of apartheid (Dratwa). The atmosphere of hate is also personal and pervasive (Egwu). Although many African countries experience xenophobic violence, murder and looting are especially rife in South Africa (Dauda et al.; Dratwa).

Despite the socioeconomic inequality driven between white and black people, violence targets African migrants, especially Nigerians. This has riled Nigeria to remove one of its ambassadors and withdraw from the World Economic Forum hosted by South Africa in 2019. Nigerians have begun fighting back as well (Egwu). By threatening the relationship between South Africa and other African countries, xenophobic violence threatens to stretch a domestic crisis into international conflict (Dauda et al.).



Statistics Dashboard from Xenowatch

Anti-immigrant groups



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Many South Africans scapegoat migrants for drugs, child abduction, prostitution, and unemployment (Chotia). This has led to the rise of anti-immigrant groups like the Put South Africans First movement and Operation Dudula. These groups unite South Africans across political lines to harass and evict immigrants. For instance, protestors during an Operation Dudula march berated shop owners for hiring too many foreigners and shouted for immigrants to “go back home” (Dratwa; Peralta). Both movements writhe with popular support. In fact, Operation Dudula was so successful that it sparked chapters in two other cities within a year (Peralta). Many anti-immigrant groups organize protests and rile up supporters through social media platforms like X and Facebook, leading to pervasive online hate speech (Dratwa).



Operation Dudula’s X Profile Picture. They have over 27 thousand followers on that platform alone.

Government Anti-immigrant Policy

The South African government has repeatedly endangered immigrant lives, which further entrenched xenophobia. COVID-19 exacerbated this discrimination. During the pandemic, the government closed immigrant-owned shops and withheld “food parcels and vouchers under the Social Relief of Distress Grant” from immigrants (Dratwa).

Anti-immigrant policies also wasted resources. For instance, at the start of COVID-19, South Africa’s government built a fence across their border with Zimbabwe to stop illegal crossings and the immigration of sick people. Ironically, South Africa had 1,845 confirmed cases— more than any other African country and over 167 times the number in Zimbabwe. Thus, the 37 million rand, or roughly 2 million US dollars, spent building the fence was a wasteful bid for security that continued to ignore South Africa’s lurking socioeconomic issues (“Current Market Rates”).

International Actions

Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA)

In 2001, the DDPA was adopted during The World Conference against Racism held in Durban, South Africa. As the United Nation’s cornerstone for fighting “racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance,” the DDPA has inspired countries around the world to take concrete steps to

combat discrimination. These include updating the curriculum to include reminders of how Africans and people of African descent have benefited society, dispersing education and technology to women and children, and addressing disparities in “employment, health care, housing, social services [,] and education.”



The DDPA also stresses how confronting past wrongs of slavery and colonialism is essential to building a more equal future (“Durban Declaration”). However, it is a “political commitment” and cannot be enforced.

Sign for the DDPA only

“ONE” Movement

A year after the xenophobic attacks of May 2008, which witnessed 62 murders and over 100,000 displacements, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) launched the “ONE” Movement. Its purpose was to erode xenophobia by engaging South Africans. Partnering with radio station METRO FM, “ONE” enlisted several celebrities across southern Africa to spread their messages of unity. They also partnered with local civil rights groups to engage young people and communities. On the bequest of IOM, the University of the Witwatersrand’s Forced Migration Studies Programme (FMSP) compiled an accompanying study of xenophobia in South Africa. The study discovered that the political climates in “townships and informal settlements” were largely responsible for the violence (‘ONE’).

Key Players

South African Government

Although the South African government used to symbolize racial reconciliation, recent policies and remarks against immigrants have torn up their reputation. In a play to wrangle votes from a disillusioned population, South Africa’s two leading political parties, the ANC under President Cyril Ramaphosa and the Democratic Alliance, have both promised to tighten regulation against unlawful immigrants and insinuated that undocumented people are responsible for alarming crime rates. Handily, these claims also remove blame from the government. Furthermore, political leaders have declared that South Africans took precedence over immigrants. Gayton McKenzie, mayor and leader of the political party Patriotic Alliance, even stated that he would “not hesitate” to turn off an immigrant’s supply of oxygen if it meant saving someone “born and bred in South-Africa” (qtd. in Charles). Politicians also



claim migrants steal resources from South Africans and that migrant shop owners “poisoned food” (Dratwa).

Yet reform persists. Unlike the ANC, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) call for all Africans to treat each other with love (Hairsine). Furthermore, the government enacted 2019’s National Action Plan to stifle xenophobia, although there has been little fruit (Egwu). Even though the government has condemned xenophobic attacks, thirst for reelection and an inability to address underlying issues have consigned them to one of xenophobia’s key culprits (Hairsine).



Then-president Cyril Ramaphosa

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

As detailed in their *Guidance on Racism and Xenophobia*, the UNHCR has steadily chipped away at xenophobia through their Regional Office for South Africa (ROSA). In 2009, after the May 2008 attacks, they partnered with the Displaced and Migrant Persons Support Programme (DMPSP) to protect immigrants through the local government and police. They also strove to weave displaced immigrants back into society. In 2013, the ROSA launched its “Ubuntu has no borders” radio program, which broadcast throughout South Africa. This program eased xenophobic tensions by addressing how refugees were being scapegoated for their nation’s poverty, “tensions between foreign and local business owners,” and more. Two years later, the ROSA published *Protection from Xenophobia: An Evaluation of UNHCR’s Regional Office for Southern Africa’s Xenophobia Related Programmes*. This report analyzed the difficulties of fighting xenophobia through traditional strategies, then advocated concrete steps to combat xenophobia, stressed that progress should be monitored more carefully, and called for greater money and resources.

Possible Solutions

Government Welfare Policies

Many victims and perpetrators of xenophobic violence are from communities boxed up and belittled by apartheid (Dratwa). For instance, the violent anti-immigrant group Operation Dudula sparked to life in Soweto, a township marked by unpaved roads and “aluminum siding” (Peralta). A 2022 census also found that 81.4% of South Africans were Black, indicating those scarred by apartheid make up a

majority of those pushing for immigrant deportation (“People of South Africa”). Thus, government welfare policies will be instrumental in weeding out xenophobia. Such policies include hiring people to fix roads and houses or reforming access to K-12 education and vocational training. Not only would this address xenophobia, but it would start to resolve crime and poverty.



Soweto

Reversing Xenophobic Impunity

Xenophobic looters and mobs routinely savor impunity. Despite thousands of displaced foreigners, barely anyone has been convicted. The South African government has made small steps, such as the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill of 2023, which defines hate crime and hate speech and imposes punishments such as but not limited to imprisonment, fine, and declaration as a “habitual criminal.” However, the government must continue to sharpen the rod against criminals by rooting out corruption, writing laws for harsher sentences against repeat offenders, and unburdening South African courts. They also need to ensure the South African Police Service and the National Prosecution Authority are working properly (ActionSA).

Glossary

Apartheid

The period from 1948 to 1994 when South Africa’s completely white government racially segregated their predominantly Black country. They also institutionalized racism in other ways, such as outlawing interracial relationships.

Township

“Segregated public-housing estates” usually in the peripheries of cities, were set aside for white people (Britannica)

Xenophobia

Hate, fear, or mistrust of foreigners



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