

# **‘Xenophobia’: Violence against Foreign Nationals and other ‘Outsiders’ in Contemporary South Africa**

**June 2010**

The Migration Issue Briefs are a resource for practitioners. They summarise state of the art research and are intended to inform discussions and debates surrounding human mobility in Southern Africa.

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# **‘Xenophobia’: Violence against Foreign Nationals and other ‘Outsiders’ in Contemporary South Africa**

## **Key Messages**

- Violence against foreign nationals and internal migrants has been an ongoing feature of post-Apartheid South Africa. While the most intense period of attacks took place in May 2008, similar patterns of violence began long before and have yet to stop.
- Violence **did not** occur in sites with the highest percentage of residents in absolute poverty, the highest rates of unemployment, the highest percentage of youth, the highest percentage of residents with low education, or the highest percentage of foreign residents.
- Violence against foreign nationals **typically occurs** in locales with high (but not the highest) levels of economic deprivation, high percentages of male residents, high levels of informal housing, and high levels of language diversity (including many South African and foreign languages). These areas often have a relatively low percentages of residents in the lowest income bracket.
- The key trigger of violence against foreign nationals and outsiders in specific locations is localised **competition for political (formal and informal) and economic power**. Leaders, and aspirant leaders, often mobilise residents to attack and evict foreign nationals as a means of strengthening their personal political or economic power within the local community. In many instances, violence has been organised by business owners intent on eliminating competitors.
- Violence against foreign nationals and ethnic minority ‘outsiders’ is a **symptom of broader challenges of legitimate and accountable local governance**, especially in informal settlements.
- Violence against foreigners and ethnic minorities is likely to continue without concerted efforts to address impunity and scapegoating. The government has made small steps in these directions but much remains to be done.

## **Terms and Definitions**

Before summarising the findings of our research, a few clarifications on terms and definitions:

- Xenophobia refers to a hatred or fear of a foreign ‘stranger.’ Although there are entrenched prejudices against non-nationals in South Africa, it is unclear to what extent violence against non-nationals is always motivated by sentiments and attitudes of hatred. Some targeting of non-nationals appears to be motivated by a desire for material or political gain.
- While not a direct cause of violence, widespread anti-outsider sentiments serve as a resource for ethnic, economic, and political entrepreneurs and criminals. Outsiders can easily become scapegoats for economic hardship and are vulnerable to robbery and attack because they lack documentation, often carry cash due to banking barriers, and are less likely to have the support of the general residents of the area. Although all South African residents face high levels of physical insecurity, outsiders are particularly vulnerable to ordinary and ‘hate’ crimes, meaning that any crime targeted at a foreign national *because* they are a foreign national can be considered xenophobic.

## Background

From 11 to 26 May 2008, foreign nationals and ethnic minorities were attacked in at least 138 sites across South Africa. This resulted in 62 reported deaths. At least a third of those killed (21) were South African citizens from ethnic minorities. In addition to the murders, over a hundred thousand people were displaced and millions of Rand of property were damaged or stolen. Since then, almost every month there has been at least one attack on groups of foreign nationals. Organisations working with migrants regularly report threats of renewed large-scale: 'Xenophobic' violence is a serious ongoing concern.

### *Understanding violence against foreign nationals requires empirical evidence rather than general structural arguments or conjecture*

The Forced Migration Studies Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand started conducting empirical research in relation to violence against foreign nationals in 2004. The FMSP's research contributes the following elements to the national discussion about 'xenophobic' violence:

- It makes a clear distinction between *discriminatory perceptions or attitudes* against foreign nationals and ethnic minorities, which are widespread throughout South African society (across race, class and gender), and *instances of group-based violence*, which only occur in specific locations. While attitudes may inform action to some extent, they are not sufficient to explain why certain actions take place in certain places at certain times. The research presented in this brief is concerned with the **factors explaining the perpetration of violence in specific places** rather than attitudes;
- It is based on **empirical evidence** gathered in violence-affected locations. This distinguishes it from analyses based on general structural arguments or conjecture which are not subject to 'on the ground' verification.

This Migration Issue Brief summarises the findings from two studies:

- Distinguishing characteristics of the 138 wards where violence was perpetrated in May 2008, compared with neighbouring wards without violence. This analysis is based on Statistics South Africa 2001 census data describing the social characteristics of all residents in selected wards;<sup>1</sup>
- Identifying triggers of violence at the community level. This is based on twelve detailed case studies in Gauteng, the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape, including cases of collective violence in May 2008 and since then.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Wa Kabwe-Segatti, A. and C. Fauvelle-Aymar, 2009 "Institutions, political participation and violence", Paper presented at Conference, *Exorcising the Demon Within: Xenophobia, Violence, and Statecraft in Contemporary South Africa* (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 22 May 2009).

<sup>2</sup> See Misago, J. P., T. Monson, T. Polzer, and L. Landau. 2010. May 2008 Violence against Foreign Nationals in South Africa: Understanding Causes and Evaluating Responses. Johannesburg, CoRMSA. Available on [www.migration.org.za](http://www.migration.org.za) or [www.cormsa.org.za](http://www.cormsa.org.za)

## Community Characteristics

- When using national census statistics to compare wards in which violence against foreign nationals was perpetrated in May 2008 and neighbouring wards where there was no violence, the following **factors characterise violent wards**:
  - high levels of **economic deprivation** (measured by proxy indicators);
  - above average percentages of **male** residents;
  - high levels of **informal housing**;
  - high levels of **language diversity** (including different South African and foreign languages).

*Violence is not adequately explained by poverty, unemployment or the presence of large numbers of migrants*

- The following factors do **not explain** the difference between wards that experience violence and those that do not:
  - percentage of residents in absolute poverty;
  - levels of unemployment;
  - percentage of youth;
  - percentage of people with low education;
  - percentage of foreign residents.

*The key trigger of violence against foreign nationals and ethnic minorities has been local competition for political and economic power*

## Triggers

- Based on in-depth field work in twelve communities around the country, the key triggers of violence against foreign nationals in the case studies are **competition for formal and informal local leadership positions** and **competition for business opportunities**. This competition generally takes place in locations where formal local governance structures are weak or considered illegitimate by the local population.
  - In many locations, leaders and aspirant leaders mobilised residents to attack and evict foreign nationals as a means of strengthening their personal power base in the local community.

- These leaders had formal positions in the community (elected ward councillors, CPF members, etc.) or they were informal leaders (self-appointed leaders, business owners, etc.). In most cases, these leaders were not recognised as legitimate by all residents of the area.
  - In other locations, South African businesspeople mobilised violence against foreign-owned businesses as a means of reducing business competition.
  - A climate of impunity with regard to 'everyday' violence and harassment of non-nationals in such areas lowers the perceived cost of mobilisation against them.
- The importance of legitimate leadership was confirmed by cases where local leaders prevented and contained violence against foreign nationals. Many of the areas immediately adjacent to places where violence was perpetrated refused to let the violence spread and either protected foreign residents or else assisted them to evacuate the area temporarily while protecting their belongings. This was in spite of these locations having the same or greater levels of poverty, unemployment and service backlogs as locations where violence was perpetrated.
- FMSP's community-level research confirmed the above-mentioned statistical research regarding community characteristics and challenged other common hypotheses concerning what causes violence. Violence was **not triggered** by:
  - a 'third force', e.g. a centralised and politicised institution aiming to challenge the government;
  - a human 'tsunami', e.g. the recent arrival of large numbers of new immigrants into these communities;
  - poor economic conditions, competition for resources or poor service delivery, as these factors were also present in many communities where violence was not perpetrated or where it was prevented;
  - organised crime. There was brigandry and opportunistic looting, but these were neither the primary motivation nor the source of popular legitimacy for those who initiated violence.

*While opportunistic looting accompanied the violence, this was neither the primary motivation nor the source of popular legitimacy for those who initiated violence*

## Implications

Implications of this analysis include the following:

- Violence against foreign nationals and ethnic minorities is a **symptom of broader challenges of legitimate and accountable local governance**, especially in informal settlements. Other symptoms include vigilante 'crime fighting', violent 'service delivery' protests, and incidents of political violence at the local level. Interventions to improve the accountability and oversight of local government structures and community-level governance structures, including monitoring local government election campaigns, are therefore crucial for preventing violence.
- While interventions to increase education and tolerance and programmes to address socio-economic deprivation and inequality are valuable and should be supported, they are unlikely to prevent violence unless coupled with accountable local leadership structures.

- Measures to reduce the real and perceived vulnerability of foreign nationals and ethnic minorities are important, including increasing foreign nationals' confidence in the police and **reducing the impunity of perpetrators** of violence against foreign nationals through effective investigation and prosecution of offenders.

## Selected FMSP Publications on Violence against Foreign Nationals and Ethnic Minorities

- Misago, J.-P., T. Monson, T. Polzer, and L.B. Landau (2010). May 2008 Violence against Foreign Nationals in South Africa: Understanding Causes and Evaluating Responses. Johannesburg, CoRMSA.
- Landau, L.B. (2010). "Loving the Alien?: Citizenship, Law, and the Future in South Africa's Demonic Society," *African Affairs*. Vol. 109(435): 213-230.
- Wa Kabwe-Segatti, A. and C. Fauvelle-Aymar, (2009). "Institutions, political participation and violence", Paper presented at Conference, Exorcising the Demon Within: Xenophobia, Violence, and Statecraft in Contemporary South Africa (University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 22 May 2009).
- Misago, J.-P., L. B. Landau, and T. Monson (2009). Towards Tolerance, Law, and Dignity: Addressing Violence against Foreign Nationals in South Africa. Johannesburg, IOM and FMSP.
- Misago, J.-P. (2009). Violence, Labour and the Displacement of Zimbabweans in De Doorns, Western Cape. Migration Policy Brief 2. Johannesburg, FMSP.
- Monson, T. and J.-P. Misago (2009). "Why History Has Repeated Itself; The Security Risks of Structural Xenophobia." *Crime Quarterly* 29: 25-34.
- Igglesden, V., T. Monson, and T. Polzer (2009). Humanitarian Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons in South Africa; Lessons Learned Following Attacks on Foreign Nationals in May 2008. Johannesburg, FMSP.
- Forced Migration Studies Programme (2007). Violence Against Foreigners in Northwest Province, Migrant Rights Monitoring Programme Occasional Report 2007/A, Johannesburg, FMSP.
- Landau, L. B., K. Ramjathan-Keogh, and G. Singh (2005). Xenophobia in South Africa and Problems Related to It. FMSP Working Paper Series 13. Johannesburg, FMSP.

## FMSP Contact People on Violence against Foreign Nationals

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