

# Letters from members of the Amandla Collective: responding to the wave of xenophobic attacks

Thursday 29 May 2008, by [ANDREWS Mercia](#), [ASHLEY Brian](#), [JANSEN Helga](#) (Date first published: 26 May 2008).

I sit here on a Monday evening after my fourth day of assisting the displaced African nationals who have come to Muizenberg from across the peninsula. They have come from Westlake, Vrygrond, Maitland, Phillipi, Nyanga, Khayalitsha Gugulethu. I am exhausted, and my only joy tonight has been that we were able to find safe accommodation for 20 Zimbabwean nationals who were sitting on the foreshore in Capetown since Friday.

Our little committee is stretched, exhausted and some of us are deeply ashamed to be South African. Our desire to jump in and assist comes from a place which wants to be reminded that we are still human, and perhaps to buy some goodwill in the event that the next time, it may be us who are refugees. It may be us who are shell shocked. It may be us who have lost everything, including the ability to determine the next 30 minutes of our lives.

Horror stories are becoming common place and I am beginning to remind myself to be shocked, to express outrage, to feel anger - to feel nothing is to lose a bit of my humanity. On Saturday evening, the reality of the situation hit us all - hard. A Somalian and his son came to us from Westlake. Scared and almost catatonic with fear. They had arrived in South Africa a week ago. On Friday, their friend was killed on the trains in a xenophobic attack. Each of us hugged this father and son. I couldn't apologise enough - all I kept saying through my tears to these total strangers was, 'I am sorry'. The son walked over to me, and held me, comforted me. How weak I must have seemed to him.

Today I went to work after a weekend of horror - where we comforted people, fed them, try to assure them they we safe. Every time I made this assurance I wondered if I was lying. If my own government couldn't ensure people's safety, how could I?

There have been moments this past 4 days when for a brief moment my faith is restored. On Saturday evening a Congolese man was stabbed in the local pub. The local patrons ran up to the church hall and begged our friends to 'stay inside, keep quiet, they will hear you. We don't want you to be killed'. These were white South Africans. Ordinary people walking into the church to hall to apologise, to hold a hand, share a smile with a traumatised child, greet a fellow human being.

Our group of volunteers have worked tirelessly, calling on old networks in foreign embassies, sending messages on the local community radio station to send relief, send food, send baby clothes, anything to ease the comfort - and perhaps ease our consciences. On Saturday evening a restaurant manager and her staff asked the owner if they could donate the unsold food from that evening. He said no. They took it anyway and brought it over to the church hall. Ordinary South African women, in their 20s, whose reality are boyfriends, clothes and living a secure life. And all they said was, 'we are here to do our bit'.

Our provincial government services have been amazing - but their own resources are stretched. And in the absence of a clear strategy, or any clear communication, and general inertia we remain in the

wilderness, just doing the best we can.

In our group we have taken a decision - we will not participate in any integration strategy if we cannot give 100% assurance of people's safety. We have put the options to our displaced friends, 1) we will ensure that they stay with us for as long as they can, 2) we will support and assist them to return to their country of origin if they choose. We have also given the assurance that we will not send anyone to the tent cities recently erected by the city of Capetown's local government. Tent cities tell the world that the situation is long-term and indefinite.

Our president has said too little, too late. Our mayor plays politics and displaced people are caught in the middle of a nightmare that was not of their making. The local coastal resort of Soet Water is housing 1500 displaced persons and to date there is no plan to return people to their homes. Officials are over stretched, and leadership is weak.

On Saturday evening my Congolese neighbours living in Muizenberg streamed into the church to find a fabled black note book. Word had got out that the displaced persons had organised a register of foreigners present. When I asked my neighbour why he wanted to sign the book he said that if anything happened to him he wanted evidence that he and his children had once lived. He said he had been through Congo in 1993. What could I say? I showed him the book and he signed it.

How much longer must we live in this pressure cooker where the labour of the poor continues to produce unbelievable wealth for a minority? What more will it take for our government to recognise that the system of wealth creation in this country is not working. That hungry people are indeed angry people. The fabled third force exists - it is the anger of South Africans who continue to wait for the South African dream constantly out of grasp, but enticingly in sight - achievable by only a minority.

When we woke up this morning we thought that we would awake to a changed country - shell shocked by the past weekends events. Instead South Africa's 'news and information leader' led with the Fidentia fraud case. The Speaker of the House hosted a lunch to commemorate the victory at Cuito Cunavale. No clear condemnation of this past weekend's horrors, no message of hope to displaced persons, no word of apology to African nations whose people were slaughtered as an expression of South Africans' anger towards their own government.

The lack of leadership and clear strategy reminds me of report I read of Hurricane Katrina which devastated New Orleans a few years ago - some say it wasn't the hurricane which destroyed peoples lives - it was a lack of leadership. The xenophobic attacks of these past days is South Africa's Katrina.

Happy Africa Day

26<sup>th</sup> May 2008

Helga Jansen

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Dear friends

The current wave of xenophobic attacks has become quite widespread moving from Johannesburg to many different parts. Cape Town has witnessed attacks in many townships leading to mass exodus of

immigrants who are fearful and traumatised. The attacks in Cape Town have not been as brutal as those in Johannesburg where more than 45 people were killed and in some instances hacked and even burnt to death. In Cape Town there also seems to be an element of people jumping on the band wagon targeting small businesses so they can get their hands on looted goods. However, this has been enough to ensure that thousands have fled their homes expecting the worst. Thousands of people are now being sheltered in community, church and other halls. Many of us have rallied to organise accommodation, food and shelter for our displaced brothers and sisters.

Offices of our organisations have been turned into centres to organise assistance and to service the places where people are being sheltered.

Already more than 15,000 Mozambicans have returned to Mozambique giving the perpetrators a temporary victory. Temporary victory because the violence has sparked a huge response from many different sectors of society in solidarity. People have come together to co-ordinate relief and emergency aid for those that have been displaced. Ordinary people have led this initiative not government. In fact government has been largely absent and we have not seen the overwhelming response we would have imagined in such an emergency. We will write shortly a more in-depth analysis of what has happened and how we understand the causes. This is just a brief note on the current situation.

In Mowbray where we live we have assisted the significant immigrant community who are being engulfed with people seeking refuge. We have found a church hall where about 100 people are now being accommodated. We have set up a committee to monitor threats to the local community and we have organised a successful meeting yesterday to draw in more forces to enlarge our solidarity. On Monday a mass meeting against xenophobia is being organised in the town hall where the entire community of Mowbray can express their solidarity with those being attacked. It will also be an opportunity for affected people to speak about what has happened and express their pain. The meeting will be followed by a march in the area to demonstrate that Mowbray is a no-go area for xenophobia. We hope this will be an example that can be repeated in other areas.

Our objective is to move into the most affected areas and rally people against attacks against so-called foreigners - many of whom have lived and worked in SA for many years.

If you find this note interesting I can forward other reports on the situation and what people are doing.

Warm greetings

Brian and Mercia