

South Africa: A Drive through a Xenophobic Landscape

by A Trade Unionist

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Friends, this is simply an account of what I saw and experienced in a twenty four period. It might be incomplete. It is not an analytical piece as such, but I hope a small step towards trying to understand what had taken place in this city, in this country that I have come to love.

Last night as we drove from the centre of Joburg to the eastern suburb of Kensington, we wondered why the police helicopter was circling over Jeppes Town, the historic centre of this city built on gold. The area is now mostly an industrial relic and has seen far better times, part wasteland, part small enterprises and a big part, home of one of the largest men's hostels in the City.

We had been discussing earlier the violence in Alex, the eruptions in other parts, and what we felt was the cause, and the inadequate response of the State. We had participated earlier in the day in a demonstration called by our Union Federation to protest against rising food prices, and against xenophobia, an issue that had been tagged on after foreigners had been brutally attacked in Alexandria township and other places. We had taken our son and his friend, and their enthusiasm had helped to minimise the disappointingly low numbers who had turned up.

We slept that night within earshot of police sirens and the whirring of helicopters and wondered what we would wake to.

At 9.00am Lesego rang the bell. A small boy for his sixteen years, wiry but capable of dribbling a football as if his feet had magnetic powers. I let him in, and he looked terrified. He had traveled from Soweto, as he did every fortnight, to come and do odd jobs to earn an allowance that he depends on to survive. We would normally have a talk about his schooling, the continuing absence of contact with his mother, and his living conditions. We hoped this might help him be capable of getting through the next hurdles he inevitably faced.

But this morning, it was fear that was etched on his face. Scrunched up in his pocket was the small round hat favoured by members of the Moslem community. Getting off the taxi at Jeppe Station, he noticed a crowd of men beating two people on the ground with knobkerries. One of those doing the beating looked up, saw him and shouted, 'Hey you, alien, come here'. He didn't wait to answer. Snatching the hat from his head, he sprinted like a springbok, and ran the kilometre to our house in sheer terror.

A quiet and reserved young man, we somehow managed to calm him down with sweet tea and reassurances. He was thinking hard before he finally spoke.

'These people have not been educated,' he said. 'They think it is the foreigners who are to blame. I fear them, but I also feel sorry for them. They think that killing poor people like themselves is going to make it better for them'.

Later I dropped him in town to connect with his taxi to Soweto, and the shack where he lived alone without electricity to read his homework and prepare for his exams the next day. Without the means to cook himself even a simple supper.

As I circled town to return home I came across hundreds and hundreds of bedraggled people, milling around an infamous taxi rank area. I pulled up next to a police woman on duty. I asked her what was going on. 'It's the Zimbabweans', she said matter-of-factly, 'They have come out of the Methodist Centre because there is trouble there'. And when I asked her what sort of trouble, she simply said, 'Something to do with Bishop Verryn'.

Some months earlier, the Methodist centre managed by the Bishop as a makeshift refuge for hundreds of destitute Zimbabweans had been raided by the police in a military style operation that belonged to another era. Purportedly looking for 'illegals' the police had uncereemoniously thrown the destitute and their few possessions into the street, had publicly assaulted perfectly innocent people, and then arrested many of them on completely spurious grounds. Bishop Paul and others were later to respond by having the entire action severely criticized by a court of law, and declared completely illegal. But the damage had been done.

The leadership of the police had given a very public indication that they regarded 'aliens' as unworthy of fair treatment under the law. Refugees, wherever they were from, were to be treated as if they were less than human, and therefore human rights guarantees under the famed South African Constitution were not to apply.

Worse, they sent a clear message to the persecuted Zimbabwean community. Do not look to the police for protection. These thoughts returned many times over the next few hours.

By now, radio news reports had started to tell what had happened the previous night, but not before my partner had phoned them and reminded them of their duty to report what was happening on our doorsteps. When approached, the public broadcaster listened carefully and promised to increase reportage, and did by the time of the next hourly bulletin. The commercial station was less receptive, and continued to air a truncated and inaccurate report for three more hours.

As I drove up Main Street in Jeppe Town, events of the previous night were clear to see. Buildings, once occupied by tens of families, were still smouldering, a fire engine stood nearby, several police cars with lights flashing had blocked roads leading to the Jeppe Hostel.

Jeppe Hostel, as it is known locally, had been at the centre of other storms in the past. In the tumultuous eighties and nineties it had been the centre for Inkatha Freedom Party activity in the area. ANC and COSATU activists who ventured there took their life in their hands. So-called 'black on black' violence that resulted in dozens of deaths were centred on the train station in Jeppe Town.

The hostel itself is now chronically overcrowded, squalid and seriously unfit for habitation, it houses thousands of poor working class men and some of their partners. It is surrounded by an urban squatter camp, made up of once busy outlets, workshops and factories that are now lived in by those who cannot or who are unable to live in the hostel. Adjoining factory floor space is divided by makeshift curtains to mark the living spaces of the working and unemployed poor. Sanitation, electricity, clean water, privacy, safety are all luxuries in this community.

As I continued up the road I noticed that despite the police presence, large groups of men carrying 'cultural weapons' (various clubs, machetes, bottles) were standing on the corners, watching, waiting. Many others, mostly family groups, were standing in their doorways looking anxiously out.

Further up the road still, I slowed to pass the building where Lesego had witnessed the beatings and from where his pursuers had emerged. A miserable building of perhaps ten electricity deprived flats. A large group of men, some middle aged, others in their early twenties were standing and watching passersby, their weapons visible for all to see. The police it seemed were keeping a safe distance.

Back at home, we listen to the news reports, and start to receive anxious calls from friends. One comrade, Paul, who worked for the trade unions in Zimbabwe for many years is here to receive treatment and staying with his brother in Cleveland, a working class suburb close by. He and his brother's family have sought refuge in the local Catholic church. He described how he witnessed mobs of drunken men from the large Denver Hostel moving from house to house asking the occupants questions in Zulu. If the reply was made in Zulu, then the visitors asked for money and moved to the next house. If not, the house was looted, the occupants assaulted, and thrown out onto the street to make a hasty escape as best they could. In between these raids, dozens of people are 'arrested' by the same mobs walking in the street, and are interrogated, systematically robbed and assaulted. Calls to the police for protection produced nothing.

'Are you safe in the church', I enquire. 'Well we have nothing', he replies, 'and we have heard that our place was raided for a second time an hour ago, and so we don't expect to find anything left, if and when we return. Right now we are at the mercy of the Salvation Army and the Red Cross. They are bringing food and blankets'.

I think to myself, the Red Cross are saving people in suburban Johannesburg.

Later in the morning I pulled into a garage to buy newspapers and see almost fifty men in groups talking on phones and to each other in a very excited manner. I started a conversation and discover that these are all displaced Nigerians who live in the Malvern suburb of Johannesburg. They mostly left their homes last night. Some slept at friends, and others in their cars. One had his car burned out when trying to escape, and managed to run into the back of a supermarket and hide. They describe how, the night before, hundreds of hostel dwellers chanting 'Zula Nation' surged into their neighbourhoods and started breaking into houses and cars, and assaulting those walking the streets.

One older man told me of a South African neighbour who climbed over the garden fence and provided an escape route through a broken fence into a park. For most of the men, their anxieties centre on the plight of their families who they had left behind. Many had South African partners and their children stayed behind in the hope that they would be able to 'pass the Zulu test', make a cash 'contribution' and be left in peace.

One middle aged man who works in the local hospital as a radiographer's assistant told me that his wife speaks Zulu and his children too. He left them behind last night as the neighbourhood shop was being ransacked and destroyed. In a distressed state he said, 'I couldn't take them with me. If we had been caught they would have been treated like foreigners, and who knows what would have happened. This is truly horrible. This would never happen to you people in Nigeria', he said.

This is certainly an instance of cell phone technology being a life line. I noticed that a pump attendant has run an extension cord around the back of the garage to the place where the Nigerians were huddled, and they are busy recharging their phones.

I ask a small group if they have plans to somehow try and organize to protect one another and their communities, to ensure that they do not become victims. A young man of around thirty takes his time to reply. 'Can you imagine the reaction of the police, the media and the government if we organised a self defense or community safety organization? We would become the target, not those who are attacking us. The police hate us already, the newspapers call us drug barons and pimps, and who do

you think ordinary South Africans are going to believe?’

Everyone was silent. A phone rang. The same young man answered, listened carefully and then said, ‘The Nigerian High Commissioner has told us all to stay calm’.

As I return home I pass another group outside a local church. They have the look of North or East Africans, and I pull up and ask if they are OK. ‘The priest is coming to meet us here’, says one. I ask where they have come from, and they point towards Bez Valley, another working class suburb near by. They are Somalis and I ask if they have experienced any trouble. No, they say, but rumours are making them afraid. Last night there was gun fire close by, and they know they will be targets if the situation worsens. We look like foreigners, says one.

Later in the afternoon I receive more calls from Paul and his Zimbabwean family from inside the church haven in Cleveland. They have had news that a neighbour tried to resist a forced entry, and has been murdered. Stabbed repeatedly and left in the front garden of his house.

At four thirty, I travel with a friend to Malvern to help evacuate a Rwandan family who settled in South Africa after the genocide in that country. Small groups of young men are walking up and down the surrounding streets. Police sirens and shouting can be heard nearby. The family gather up a few belongings and are resettled in a local hotel courtesy of the NGO who employ the mother. We take the children, and the parents follow closely behind in their own car. It’s a solemn drive for the three children and our attempts at humour are politely tolerated.

I have a conversation with another Rwandan and he tells me that some people might think that evacuation is an over reaction, but he says, ‘We have learnt to smell danger of this type. The marauding gangs, the inability of the police to keep control, the under-reporting on the radio, the pent up frustrations, the absence of neighbours ready to help or warn. All of these things we have seen before, and now we can smell them’.

At five thirty I make my way back towards Jeppes Town to collect my son from his friend’s house where he had spent the night. He had heard shooting earlier, and the police sirens, and had seen the helicopter circling. They had stayed within the grounds of the closed estate, and played football. On the way home, I fielded dozens of questions from him about what had been happening, and as if on cue he said, ‘If you are poor, how can you blame others who are also as poor as you, it doesn’t make sense Dad?’

Later that night, we drove down Jules Street and saw municipal workers starting to clear up the mess left behind from shop burnouts and looting. A row of ten shops was completely destroyed, and small groups of men carrying clubs were still to be seen in full view of the police. We came away from the scene feeling that this was not over. There was more and possibly worse to come.

On the news late last night, the police said they had restored law and order in most parts, and that arrests of suspects had been made, and serious charges would be made against them.

This morning, my Zimbabwean friend called to say that two more people had been killed a short way from the church where he was hiding, and that gunshots and screams had kept everyone awake all night.

The newspapers carry a front page photograph of a man who was set alight by a mob. It reminds me of the Buddhist monks who campaigned against the war in Vietnam. Is this a war?

Meanwhile the politicians and media commentators proffer explanations and condemnations, and it suddenly dawns on me that the only people I have not spoken to or have heard from are the

perpetrators. And I wonder, what on earth do they think they are hoping to achieve?

22 May 2008:

Three days later, and it seems everyone is aware of the gravity of the crisis. The President of the country has sanctioned the use of the army though they are not yet deployed to keep the peace.

Two days ago I went to visit my comrade Paul from Zimbabwe, who had been sleeping in Germiston Town Hall for the past two nights. He is a born organiser and has been serving on the committee that manages the food, sanitation, facilities for children, and security.

He takes me on a tour of the Town Hall, a place we have used in the past for May Day rallies. It's a little run down but still maintains some of its former glory. Now it is one massive bedroom. More than three thousand people are staying here, and most are very afraid. I speak to many others, and hear very similar stories of extreme bullying, violence, theft, and a sense that they have been abandoned to their fate. My friend has been sleeping on a chair because floor space is limited, and its getting cold. Not everyone has a charity blanket, and there is not enough food to feed all. In the absence of proper communications, rumours ripple like Mexican waves across the multitude that are assembled outside, and generate fear.

One large room has been reserved for women, and many are carrying small children and receiving baby food and nappies. It's clear that many are in a traumatized state, and barely smile when greeted. One can only shudder when thinking about what they have gone through.

I have a brief conversation with a couple of municipal workers inside the building who are members of my union, and am struck by their sympathy towards the refugees despite the increased workload, and near impossible conditions. The toilets have limited capacity, and the kitchen has never had to be put to use to feed such numbers, but union members are working hard, being decent and helpful. One of the shop stewards tells me: 'Everyone here is so grateful for the little that we can do, but I cant stop feeling ashamed that this is happening in my locality. No one deserves to be treated like this'.

Paul collects his few possessions and we leave for home where he will stay for the foreseeable future, but not before he says a tearful farewell to his committee members, and is reassured that his relatives and others are in relatively safe hands.

This morning the news reports of attacks on communities seem to be more sporadic, although they do appear to be spreading into other Provinces.

Another demonstration has been called for Saturday, by a conglomeration of left groups and community campaigns. I am hoping that there can be a united response, that is inclusive, and non sectarian. I hope the unions will support it despite difficulties that exist between the left groups and the trade union movement.

There is a great deal of speculation about the 'troubles' being started by a 'third force', some form of underground organization bent on subverting the peace and creating disharmony. It's mostly speculative. It is clear however that many of the attacks have been coordinated, and especially at a local level. Similar sized groups have been moving from house to house on assigned streets for example, and of course, chanting and demanding the same things. But there are also attacks that appear more opportunistic, and often following a rally or large gathering.

Much of the commentary and analysis from both left and right seems to me to be very simplistic, as if the analysts are not talking to people on the ground, are not asking questions like, for example,

why in the gatherings of the xenophobic there are so few women? What does this tell you about the men of this country? Why, for example, there has been virtually no action against white people? What does this tell you about what is happening in communities that experience grinding poverty? So many questions. So much to be done.

P.S.

* From Amandla!:

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