THE IMPACT OF XENOPHOBIA ON REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Xenophobia in South Africa: An overview

- Xenophobic attacks not a new phenomenon in South Africa (started even before May 2008 attacks that rocked the nation and the international community)
- Attacks did not disappear with 2008 attacks- incidents of xenophobic and xenophobic-related violence continue to be reported in South Africa
- in May 2009, local businesspeople sent letters to Somali traders in Khayelitsha threatening them if they did not move out of the area within a week.
- Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in SA, “attacks on foreigners have continued, with national statistics showing that, in 2011, one person a week, on average, was killed, while 100 were seriously injured and over 1,000 were displaced”.
- Scalabrini Centre outreach manager Sergio Carciotto “about 200 foreigners had been killed in South Africa last year through common crime and xenophobic violence.”
- The causes of xenophobic violence quite complex- fuelled by socio-economic factors (most recent attacks have been sparked by service delivery protests which turned violent), frustrations of being unheard by government of the day and of not having pressing needs met by government. The frustrations are often transferred to non-nationals in the community-Zamdela community in Sasolburg (January-February 2013), Sebokeng community, (May 2013) Orange Farm (May 2013) and Diepsloot (May 2013)
- In some cases, the violence does not start as xenophobic violence but as dissatisfaction and frustrations grow, they are transferred to a more vulnerable group in communities-refugees and asylum seekers
- Xenophobic violence manifests in the looting of shops owned by non-nationals, destruction of their shacks, etc
- Institutionalised xenophobic tendencies and attitudes experienced by refugees and asylum seekers in public institutions, e.g. hospitals, clinics, police stations, licensing departments, schools, etc – instigated by public officials
- The greatest scourge of xenophobic violence has been perpetrated in margins of formal society, where foreign nationals compete with the poorest South Africans to eke out a menial living—(INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS).
Refugees and Asylum Seekers: That specialised group of migrants

- Refugees and asylum seekers are a specialised group of migrants in any country and their stay in South Africa is governed by the Refugees Act, not the Immigration Act.
- SA Refugees Act 130 of 1998: a refugee is a person who flees country of origin “owing to well-founded fear of persecution” or someone who flees country of origin due to events in either part or whole of the country of origin which events disrupt public order.
- SA Refugees Act combines both the UN Convention on Refugees definition and the OAU (now AU) Convention governing specific aspects of refugee rights and is broader.
- Fear of persecution or continued persecution is the factor leading to flight.
- Refugees and asylum seekers are therefore people who have no choice but to flee their countries of origin—often the flight is not planned but is necessary to preserve life and for survival.
- Persecution in the country of origin includes torture, enforced disappearance of loved ones, beatings and assault, rape, watching others being killed, forced recruitment into rebel army groups, etc.
- Victims often do not have time to put their houses in order or gather belongings; only clothes on their backs are what they flee with, sometimes no documentation (ID or Passport) – implications: entering the country through illegal and often times dangerous points of entry.
- Often the reasons for flight and the journey itself is traumatic (not come through Beitbridge and Musina borderpost (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Rwandese, Congolese, Burundians, Ugandans, Malawians, Somalis and Ethiopians).
- Upon arrival in South Africa, they start rebuilding their lives, from scratch.
- They are absorbed into menial labour, e.g., hospitality, construction, farm work, domestic work, gardening work, shopkeeping, etc.
- They provide cheap labour out of desperation and employers prefer them over SA citizens “they are unlikely to cause trouble or make unnecessary demands” e.g., wage increase, better working conditions, protests, etc.
- Daily hardships faced by other migrants in South Africa are added life stressors for refugees and asylum seekers who are already a traumatised group of people in need of rehabilitation and psychosocial services to regain their lives.
- Where they become aware of the need to seek counselling and other psycho-social services, the bread and butter issues are often more pressing and real than psychological healing they need.
- CSVR offers psycho-social services to refugees and asylum seekers from Africa and abroad, who are torture survivors, in addition to victims and survivors of torture within South Africa.
Impact:

- Refugees and asylum seekers are a traumatised group of society (due to persecution from country of origin)
- Double jeopardy- from the frying pan to the fire and having nowhere to go.
  - they have suffered from the country of origin, the journey to South Africa for most refugees and asylum seekers is also fraught with danger and problems (crossing the sometimes flooded Limpopo River in summer and autumn seasons, becoming prey of gangs patrolling no man’s land between BeitBridge and Musina borderposts known as “magumagumas”-they rape women, mug refugees and asylum seekers of their belongings including money, cellphones and their clothes and those with no valuable belongings are beaten up.
  - In South Africa, they contend with being called derogatory names by citizens, eg “makwerekwere”, told go back to your country, South Africa is not for you, you are taking away our businesses, our wives and houses meant for us, etc
  - they struggle to access services in South Africa, eg banking services, permits (due to endemic corruption within Dept of Home Affairs where they are asked to pay bribes in order to get permits, or for existing permits to be renewed), proper accommodation (most landlords refuse to accept refugee permits and asylum permits- that is why most stay in informal settlements where the only requirement is that you are able to pay rent, once you default, your belongings are forcefully removed and thrown on the street, etc
  - Xenophobia adds to the problems asylum seekers and refugees encounter: images of large groups of people chanting slogans, welding machetes and pangas evokes memories of experiences from country of origin for torture survivors who would have fled from similar events.
- Cyclic traumatisation- first trauma from country of origin, second trauma from life stressors of daily life, third trauma from xenophobia and other related violence
- Starting over all over again- belongings and other valuables are often looted. Refugees and asylum seekers will have to start all over again to accumulate basic belongings necessary for survival.
- Internal displacements – children are often separated from parents, husbands from wives. Homes and belongings are also left behind during flight.
What must be done?

- CSOs have always raised early warning signs to government about xenophobia - government must therefore take heed of these early warning signs to deal with xenophobia.
- Government interventions are always re-active not pro-active. There is therefore a need for government to come up with initiatives to ensure that xenophobia is not tolerated.
- Government has been in denial about prevalence of xenophobia - Diepsloot attacks - Police were adamant it was not xenophobia (this may be true when you look at how the attacks started, but the looting of foreign owned shops only proved there was a xenophobic element in the attacks).
- There is need for civic education about the push and pull factors for refugees and asylum seekers to find themselves in South Africa. Misconceptions and wrong information that refugees and asylum seekers are here to steal jobs and houses meant for South Africans are often reasons behind xenophobic attacks.