Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

South Africa – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 20 October 2016

Were there xenophobic attacks in South Africa in 2015?

The 2016 Freedom House report for South Africa states:

> "Xenophobic violence against immigrants from other African countries has broken out sporadically in recent years. In a wave of attacks that spread from Durban to Johannesburg in April, foreign-owned shops were torched, thousands of people were displaced, and at least seven people were killed. Further xenophobic violence was reported in October and November, including some deadly attacks." (Freedom House (24 May 2016) *Freedom in the World 2016 - South Africa*)

The 2016 Human Rights Watch report on the events of 2015 in South Africa, in a paragraph headed "Xenophobic Attacks on Foreign Nationals", states:

> "In April 2015, thousands of people looted foreign-owned shops and attacked non-South African nationals in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal province. Several people died and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said an estimated 2,400 people were internally displaced. The targets of the widespread violence were immigrants of African origin, mostly from Zimbabwe and Somalia. The xenophobic attacks spread to parts of Johannesburg before authorities deployed the army to stop the violence. In October, xenophobic violence displaced more than 500 people in Grahamstown, in the Eastern Cape Province." (Human Rights Watch (27 January 2016) *World Report 2016 - South Africa*)

The 2015 US Department of State country report for South Africa, in a section titled "Protection of Refugees" (sub-section titled "Refugee Abuse"), states:

> "Xenophobic violence occurred against foreign nationals running small, informal grocery stores known as 'spaza' shops in townships and informal settlements; refugees registered and owned many spaza shops.
>
> Two major outbreaks of violence occurred during the year: the first in January, in Soweto Township, near Johannesburg; and the second in April, in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal Province. The violence displaced or otherwise affected approximately 1,400 individuals in Soweto and nearly 9,000 in Durban. The attacks were triggered by an alleged killing of a minor by a Somali shopkeeper during an attempted robbery of the shop. The community reacted by attacking foreigners. The attacks in Durban followed comments by the Zulu king, a powerful social figure to Zulus, calling irregular immigrants 'lice' and urging them to return to their countries. The scale of the displacements in Durban necessitated the establishment of temporary shelters (resembling refugee camps) to house the displaced; at their peak, the shelters housed nearly 5,000 persons. Working with regional officials and

the International Organization for Migration, the government repatriated nearly 2,000 persons to their home countries.

A think tank estimated that more than 350 foreigners had been killed by mob violence since 2008, although a refugee rights NGO estimated the number at more than 900. Citizens who blamed immigrants for job and housing losses and increasing crime generally perpetrated such attacks. Attacks on migrant traders resulted in deaths, injuries, arson, and destruction of property (see sections 1.d. and 6). Security forces quickly evacuated migrants from their shops to reduce deaths and injuries, but property destruction and theft continued to be major problems.

On April 10, during antiforeigner riots in Durban, an angry mob locked two Ethiopian shopkeepers inside the shipping container they used as a shop and set it on fire. The owner of the property managed to free the shopkeepers with a crowbar, but one of the two later died of third-degree burns at the hospital." (US Department of State (13 April 2016) *2015 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – South Africa*, pp.22-23)

A report from Al Jazeera states:

"Hundreds of foreign nationals have sought refuge at a local police station in the town of Isipingo in South Africa, almost four days after a series of alleged xenophobic attacks in the town, local activists said. Community activist China Ngubane, told Al Jazeera on Thursday that tensions were still high in Isipingo, around 19 km from Durban, with hundreds of mostly Congolese nationals, many of them refugees, unable to return to their homes or businesses. 'About 250 people were directly attacked, according to authorities, but there are more than 500 others who come to the station, scared, especially at night,' Ngubane said. The small town of Isipingo erupted on Monday when residents attacked foreign nationals living in the town." (Al Jazeera (2 April 2015) *Foreigners in S Africa fearful after xenophobic attacks*)

An Agence France Presse report states:

"Two Ethiopian nationals suffered serious burns when their shop in a South African township was set alight by a mob, police said Saturday, as violence against foreign immigrants spread. The men were in the shop in Umlazi, south of Durban, when it was petrol bombed on Friday night. 'They suffered severe burn wounds and are being treated in hospital,' police spokesman Thulani Zwane said. Three people including one foreigner had been killed in violence between residents and foreign nationals that has been raging for the past two weeks in townships south of Durban." (Agence France Presse (11 April 2015) *Ethiopians badly burned as S. Africa anti-foreigner violence spreads*)

A Xinhua General News Service report states:

"More foreign-owned shops have been burned in a new spate of xenophobia-related violence in parts of South Africa, authorities said on Monday. This came despite reinforcement of police force in troubled areas around Durban, KwaZulu-Natal Province. Violence spread to more impoverished townships where local communities grudge against foreigners for opening 'illegal business' and taking up employment that should have belonged to locals. In

> Umlazi township, attacks on foreign-owned shops were reported overnight, police spokesperson Major Thulani Zwane said. Then the violence spread to nearby township KwaMashu, he said. 'We have had several cases in Umlazi overnight where shops were looted and then set on fire,' the spokesman said. 'It was also hectic last night in KwaMashu, with the violence spreading there near the men's hostel. Foreign-owned shops were attacked and when everything of value was stolen the places were torched. People even blocked the roads with burning barricades to stop police from doing their jobs,' Zwane said." (Xinhua General News Service (13 April 2015) *Africa Focus: More foreign-owned shops burned in S. Africa xenophobia-related violence*)

An Al Jazeera report states:

> "More than 1,000 people have been displaced after violence against foreign nationals flared up on March 30 in the country's coastal province of KwaZulu-Natal, whose capital is Durban. The attacks soon spread inland to the country's financial hub, Johannesburg, in Gauteng province. On Saturday, another two people were reported killed, bringing the death toll in the latest wave of attacks to eight, South African police said." (Al Jazeera (20 April 2015) *South Africa arrests hundreds over xenophobic violence*)

In a paragraph headed "Trouble spots" this report states:

> "The violence in Johannesburg centred around trouble spots such as Jeppestown, Alexandra, Malvern, Thokoza and Cleveland. Jeppestown was tense on Saturday following overnight clashes and looting of foreign-owned shops. However, Mina Demian, a local reporter who visited the neighbourhood, said the incidents of violence were random. He said that there was a sense that people were going out at night to target shops." (ibid)

An article from Canadian newspaper the Globe and Mail states:

> "It's the photo that has shocked a nation: the stark image of a helpless Mozambican migrant pleading for his life as a gang of men brutally murdered him in a Johannesburg street in front of a silent audience of onlookers. First the men stalked him along the street. Then one clubbed him with a wrench, while another stabbed him. The Mozambican fell bleeding to the ground and died minutes later, becoming the latest victim in a wave of anti-foreigner attacks sweeping across South Africa. More than 5,000 migrants, mostly from African nations, have been forced from their homes because of the violence in recent weeks, according to the United Nations refugee agency. Many are sheltering in makeshift camps, while others have boarded buses home to Mozambique, Malawi, Zimbabwe and elsewhere. At least seven people have been killed, and many foreign-owned shops have been looted and razed, as foreigners are blamed for unemployment and other economic and social problems." (The Globe and Mail (20 April 2015) *South Africa: Murder in Johannesburg deepens crisis: Publicized street killing sparks government reaction but anti-foreigner attacks still go unpunished and migrants flee for their lives*)

A Voice of America news report states:

> "After weeks of violence in impoverished areas of Johannesburg and Durban, South Africa's defense minister announced Tuesday that soldiers will join with

police to stop the xenophobic attacks. The attacks, which began earlier this month, have displaced hundreds of African immigrants and led to hundreds of arrests. Defense Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula described the situation as a 'crisis.' Immigrants from African nations including Congo, Ethiopia, Malawi, Nigeria, Somalia and Zimbabwe have been among the targets of the attacks. Many have sought temporary shelter at makeshift camps, while some African embassies say they are seeing a steady stream of citizens trying to return home." (Voice of America (21 April 2015) *S. Africa Deploys Army to Curb Xenophobic Attacks*)

An article from The Economist states:

"A street vendor from Mozambique, Emmanuel Sithole, lay begging for his life in a gutter as four men beat him and stabbed him in the heart with a long knife. Images of his murder have shaken South Africa, already reeling from a wave of attacks on foreigners, mostly poor migrants from the rest of Africa. Soldiers were deployed on April 21st to Alexandra, a Johannesburg township, and other flashpoints to quell the violence, though only after seven people had been killed. Thousands of fearful foreigners, many from Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, have sought refuge in makeshift camps. Others have returned home.

South Africa has experienced such horrors before. During widespread anti-foreign violence in 2008, 62 people were killed and some 100,000 displaced. Photographs of the murder of another Mozambican man, Ernesto Nhamuave, whom a jeering mob burned alive in a squatter camp, led to declarations that such atrocities would never happen again. Yet no one was charged in Mr Nhamuave's death: the case was closed after a cursory police investigation apparently turned up no witnesses (who were easily found by journalists earlier this year). The latest violence flared up in the Durban area earlier this month after King Goodwill Zwelithini, the traditional leader of the Zulus, reportedly compared foreigners to lice and said that they should pack up and leave." (The Economist (25 April 2015) *Blood at the end of the rainbow: Xenophobia in South Africa*)

An article from Nigerian newspaper The Sun states:

"For about two weeks now, the world has watched in horror and utter consternation the grisly scenes in South Africa where xenophobic attacks were unleashed on black foreigners resident in the country. The attacks, which lasted for several days, began in the coastal city of Durban and later spread to other cities in the country, leaving at least seven people dead and hundreds injured. One of the gory scenes in the dastardly attacks was that of a Mozambican who was butchered in full view of the public. Shops and other property owned by foreigners, including Nigerians, were destroyed in the coordinated onslaught that shocked the world. In some instances, South African Police officials were seen looking the other way while the attacks went on, fueling speculations of complicity in the barbaric act." (The Sun (26 April 2015) *Stop the xenophobic attacks in S'Africa*)

A report from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees states:

"When Congolese refugee Faiza Lugi saw the mob toting machetes and heavy knobkerrie sticks surge down the main street in this port city chanting

> anti-foreigner slogans, she knew that it was time to run again. Having fled war, gang rape and chaos in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) more than a decade ago, she abandoned her roadside stall selling footwear in Durban and ran from the rabble as it looted businesses, torched homes and killed at least seven people." (UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (20 October 2015) *Attacks on foreigners in South Africa expose refugee women to new dangers*)

This report also states:

> "The xenophobic attacks came amid a downturn in the South African economy that led to the scapegoating of foreigners, among them hundreds of already highly vulnerable refugees like Lugi. Following the government's efforts to quell the violence, and a UNHCR initiative to help refugees reintegrate into their adoptive society with financial assistance, Lugi and her mother went back to their rented quarters in Mayville - although their return was short lived.
>
> "During their absence their room had caught alight and everything in it burnt to ashes in what Lugi believes was an act of sabotage. 'I was devastated,' she says. 'Years of hard work had burnt to the ground.'" (ibid)

An article from UK newspaper The Guardian states:

> "An outbreak of violence against foreign nationals in South Africa has highlighted the government's failure to get to grips with xenophobia, amid worries that there is more violence to come. It started, as these things so often do, with a rumour. An 'Arab man with a beard' was said to be responsible for a string of murders and mutilations in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. It ended with violence and fire and destruction, and an unmistakeable message to foreigners: you are no longer welcome here." (The Guardian (9 November 2015) *South Africa: attacks on migrants show failure to stem racial tension*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research and Information Unit within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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