Published on *Treatment Action Campaign* (http://tac.org.za/community)

Shattered Myths: The xenophobic violence in South Africa

By *Nathan Geffen*
Created *2008/06/16 - 10:27pm*
16 June, 2008 - 22:27 ? Nathan Geffen

By Nathan Geffen, Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) Policy Co-ordinator

1 June 2008

Part One: Shattered Myths

On Thursday 22 May, Cape Town changed forever. The xenophobic violence that started 1,200 kilometres away in Gauteng spread to Du Noon township. On Friday the TAC offices began to get reports of violence on trains and Somali shops being looted. The details were scanty, but by Friday evening the consequences became visible even in the affluent city centre. About 150 people sought refuge outside Caledon Square, the city's main police station. Hundreds more gathered at the central train station so they could catch a train to Johannesburg in the morning and then leave the country.

A group of mainly Congolese men at Caledon Square, explained that they had no trust in any South African government institution and demanded to see the UNHCR so they could be repatriated. They said they would not move from Caledon Square until then even if it rained. One of them is a published writer and another lost his computer training school, worth tens of thousands of rands, in the violence. Angry young Burundians screamed at me that they wanted nothing more to do with my country. Malawian youths mournfully described how they felt they had no choice but to return home.

A Malawian husband and wife huddled with their child in the cold train station. The couple had been beaten and they were now returning home. Three men, who had not been beaten themselves were nevertheless terrified and determined to get back to Zimbabwe.

Soon we found out that thousands of immigrants, and some non-Xhosa speaking people from other South African provinces, had gathered into community centres in Khayelitsha, the metropolitan area's largest township, to escape the terror.

As Friday night progressed, we realised that there were thousands of displaced people across the Cape Peninsula and that government was not organised to respond to their urgent needs of food, blankets and sanitation. We managed to organise provisions for Caledon Square and the station, but by 3am we had decided that we would have to be back early in the morning to do the same on a massive scale across the city. I got a couple of hours sleep and went back to work, joined by colleagues and volunteers.

Early next morning, the TAC, AIDS Law project, ARASA and Sonke Gender Justice offices at 122 Longmarket Street were nearly instantly converted from an activist centre into a disaster relief one. Saturday was a chaotic blur: none of us had experience in what had to be done. Dozens of people were doing hundreds of tasks, some answered the endlessly ringing phones and recorded details of new refugee centres springing up all over the city, some put out calls anywhere and everywhere to get food, blankets and other donations delivered to our offices, others raised money. I have a vague recollection of barking orders, shouting, ranting, losing my temper non-stop for 19 hours. Despite the mess, we

managed to fulfil nearly every critical demand that came our way. The city's Disaster Management provided a little help but was clearly not prepared for such a large disaster.

The TAC Khayelitsha office, with much fewer resources than us, also quickly revamped itself to become a 24 hour distribution point for emergency relief and assistance, including safety, at one point supporting six refuges in the township sheltering over 2,000 people.

By Sunday, our Cape Town office had dramatically improved the system and turned Saturday's chaos into an ordered operation with a control room that collected information which was then sent to a dispatch system. By Monday, we had a venue where large amounts of donations of essential materials were delivered. ARASA with the assistance of SHAWCO, conducted health assessments of sites. Sonke produced anti-xenophobia posters and t-shirts saying ?Foreigner?, which have been an instant hit. Our operation ran non-stop for 60 hours and even when we closed for the first time on Monday evening, it was only for a few hours. The TAC Khayelitsha's operation was as impressive and run by much poorer people.

Hundreds of volunteers, organisations and companies lent a hand. Jewish, Muslim and Christian organisations worked together. Habonim Dror made several thousand sandwiches in one day. The Bo Kaap mosques helped out many of the women and children staying at Caledon Square. His People sheltered up to 800 people at their N1 City church. The Methodist churches all opened their doors to refugees. St Georges Cathedral, the long serving bastion of struggle politics, was the venue for a large anti-xenophobic rally addressed by the Chief Justice. An enormous, urgent and co-operative civil society effort ensured that thousands of people, who have turned Cape Town into a fledgling cosmopolitan city, were reasonably fed and warm after the worst pogrom in our country's post-freedom history.

For three days we almost entirely replaced the role of our incapable state. We built a database of all the refugee sites and shared it with City Disaster Management or anyone else willing to help. And we organised clothes, warmth and food for thousands of people.

Our database eventually listed just under 70 sites and over 20,000 people displaced. By mid-week the numbers had dropped to about 15,000 because people felt safe to return to their homes in some areas. But hundreds, perhaps thousands, caught trains and buses to leave the city and would not have been recorded at all. Many refugees have also been put up in private homes. My guess is that the pogrom drove 30,000 people to spend at least one night out of their homes in the Western Cape.

South Africa's official opposition Democratic Alliance runs the city. The ruling ANC runs the province and national government. For the first few days, there was hardly any response by the provincial and national government. So our media statements were more favourable toward the city. But what shocked us was that the mayor, Helen Zille, and the provincial premier, Ebrahim Rasool, would not meet or work with each other in the face of Cape Town's biggest disaster. Every time we spoke to either party, we would be given long, frankly boring and childish excuses with the one blaming the other for non-co-operation.

The city's response, albeit better than the province at first, was also awful. The inefficiencies can be forgiven - perhaps; the city is simply not prepared for a disaster of this size. However, the decision by the mayor to establish what are essentially refugee camps in damp, cold conditions on the outskirts of the metropole, unserviced by adequate transport or health-care is wrong for many reasons, which will be explained in part two.

The Caledon Square group is steadfastly refusing to go to one of these camps. At one point they went on hunger strike with the simple demand that they wanted a lawyer. Several lawyers offered services free to them the next day. We have since gained their trust and as I write this they are staying in a Jewish school hall in the mainly white suburb of Sea Point not far from the city centre. The people who run the school have been overwhelmed by their dignity and political acuity.

Nearly every immigrant I have spoken to wanted to leave South Africa. It will take time for this entirely justified anger

to subside. On the positive side, successful reintegration efforts are happening in a number of places including Khayelitsha, Masiphumelele and elsewhere.

Two weeks ago most people in South Africa and many people throughout the world believed we were the so-called rainbow nation, a country that valued its diversity. Despite hiccups left over from the apartheid era and a high crime-rate, this was apparently a society working hard to be tolerant of difference. On Thursday 22 May I believed I lived in a city that was becoming urbane and sophisticated. These myths have now been shattered - and they were never true. It is shameful that a terror so awful has been unleashed that some people would rather return to failed states like Zimbabwe and Somalia than stay in Africa's richest and, at least so we thought, most successful country.

The decade of racial politics by President Thabo Mbeki who has fostered corruption, paid lip service to accountability and service delivery, denied the science of HIV, prevaricated on crime and helped keep the Mugabe government in power, has been sharply exposed. Government, at every level, failed to respond appropriately to the xenophobes' pogrom. And we all failed to realise how the inequalities in our society would rupture it so hideously so quickly.

This has been a hard, sad, sleepless week in which I found out that the idea of a city I thought I loved never really existed. But through the misery and the barbarism there are slivers of hope: Most immigrants remain part of our society. And there were the diverse ordinary people and organisations who worked together in Khayelitsha and the city centre to do their civic duty in harrowing circumstances to demonstrate that Somalis, Zimbabweans, Congolese, Ugandans, Malawians, Tshangaans and all others belong in Cape Town.

PS: There are numerous people and organisations I would like to mention and thank, but I am bound to forget some critical ones, so I will refrain from attempting this.

Part two: Playing Race Politics During a Disaster

The state's political failure over the last two weeks in South Africa has been comprehensive. President Mbeki has been accurately and justifiably denounced in the Sunday Times, New York Times and Wall Street Journal and there is nothing further that need be said about this failed leader; he must simply be removed from power.

It is the leaders of the Western Cape and in particular Cape Town whose deplorable leadership needs to be exposed.

Ebrahim Rasool, the Western Cape premier is embattled. His faction no longer controls the ANC in this province and he is plagued with accusations of improper conduct. He also appears to spend far too much of his time trying to remove the mayor from office. I was asked on radio last week what in particular I wished to criticise about his government's response to the mass displacement of people in Cape Town that started on 22 May. The answer was that there is nothing in particular to criticise because the Western Cape government did absolutely nothing useful for three critical days.

But it is Mayor Helen Zille, the leader of the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA), on whom I wish to focus most of this blog. I did not vote for her but before this disaster I was respectful of her and had some positive interactions with her. She has a deserved reputation for efficiency and financial incorruptibility, two attributes sorely needed in South African politics.

She has also been the main political beneficiary of the xenophobic violence and her behaviour indicates that she knows it and will exploit it.

For one thing, many people perceive her to have been the one political party leader to have responded to the displaced people. She can of course thank civil society for doing the bulk of the work that she and Premier Rasool should have worked together to do.

More importantly she undoubtedly realises that the Coloured vote upon whom she depends for power looks very secure. Many Coloured ANC voters or fence-sitters will have been frightened by the xenophobic attacks. If this

happened to immigrants, could we be next, they will wonder. They will be concerned about a predominantly African party controlling the Western Cape and therefore be more likely to vote for the DA. Next year's elections, in which her party hopes to capture the Western Cape Province, look promising for Zille.

But Zille has been concerned that by keeping displaced people in community halls where weddings and other events are due to take place she would anger her potential voters. Therefore she has established refugee camps --which she euphemistically calls safe zones-- far from communities and far from the city. Out of sight, out of mind.

These camps are a bad idea for a number of reasons that the UN and other expert relief agencies like Medecins Sans Frontieres have explained. The South African government has no expertise to run them. Containing health epidemics in such crowded unhealthy conditions is extremely difficult. They have the potential to become permanent or at least long-term and they make reintegration even more difficult.

Zille has refused to open community halls, such as the Sea Point Civic Centre for the Caledon Square group, to house displaced people. Many of the Soetwater camp displaced were originally in Ocean View's community hall but she gave in to the community's anger about having them there. Despite her claims to the contrary, we are aware of at least some displaced people being forcibly moved to these camps. The city continues to put pressure on displaced people, especially at smaller refuges, to move there. The Department of Home Affairs has been insisting on immigration status information from the people in the camps, further fuelling distrust.

Also listen to the angry complaints of the displaced people in Youngsfield camp, a military facility incidentally. The Caledon Square refugees refuse to go to the camps because many of them have experienced the horrors of camps like these before in places like Rwanda and the DRC. They also need to get to work and their children to school, a Herculean task if one is based in most of these camps.

There is however an even more important reason why these camps are a bad idea. They signify victory for the xenophobes. The message Zille has sent out is that if you purge your community of people different to you, you can get away with it. The purged will lose and the purgers will win. So much for upholding the rule of law.

Then there have been her spate of thoughtless, even xenophobic, comments. I have been sceptical in the past of accusations against her that she uses race conflict as a political tool. But I have seen first-hand how she did it this past week.

"I have just witnessed a very disturbing incident where migrants behaved extremely abusively and perfectly good food was being thrown around. Some of the food may have been past its sell-by date, but it was good to eat. Local residents are understandably becoming very angry and an explosion will follow unless a serious security force deployment takes place," she told Disaster Management in front of TAC people. Read Eduard Grebe's comment on the TAC website.

?We must all remember that not only refugees, or whatever they are [said dismissively], have rights. Other people have rights too,? she said at the same meeting and in similar words to my colleagues and me at least twice.

?Community Halls were expressly intended from the outset, to be temporary measures during the height of the violence,? she said in email correspondence justifying the camps, with the implication that the camps are not temporary.

?I cannot expect people to cancel a wedding in a community hall at a day's notice,? she told us as an example of some of the people whose rights competed with the victims of last week's pogrom.

In another meeting she pointed out that those who booked community halls are tax-paying South Africans, forgetting it seems that every person who buys something in the country pays VAT and that the Bill of Rights does not differentiate taxpayers from non-taxpayers.

One thought has shaped Helen Zille's response to this crisis: If she plays her cards right, tomorrow the Western Cape belongs to her.

A group of representatives from civil society met her on Wednesday. While grudgingly thankful of our effort, she was rude and officious - like no other politician I have ever met. She cut a lonely figure, unaccompanied by a single colleague. This is the behaviour of someone who thinks she can rule without listening or taking advice. Our president shares these hubristic qualities.

Our party politics is horribly wrong. Both the ANC and DA have failed South Africa, especially in the last two weeks. We need to change things dramatically if we are to avoid a descent into barbarism.

Part Three: How did it happen?

Aziz Pahad and his brother Essop, the President's right-hand man, attempted to explain the outbreak of xenophobic violence in the country's major cities as a product of a third force. For this, the Sunday Times made Essop its Mampara of the Week.

There is no need to introduce conspiracy to understand what has happened over the past couple of weeks.

The outbreak of xenophobic violence can be explained by an unfavourable combination of a few factors: an already violent society, the acceptance ?even encouragement? of xenophobia, massive inequality, the increased threat of poverty exacerbated by consistent service delivery failure and demographics.

South Africa's gini co-efficient (the standard measure of inequality) is about 58, making us one of the ten most unequal countries in the world and we are by far the most ethnically diverse of these. There is competition among poor people for basic materials like food and shelter but also commodities that allow people to be more included in our society: televisions, DVD players, cell phones, better clothes and computers for example.

All suburbs across the world's major cities are composed of communities whose members assist each other to obtain wealth. These communities are usually strongly centred around ethnic identity. Xhosas, Zulus, Afrikaners, English, Jews, Muslims, Somalis, Indians, Congolese, Nigerians, Zimbabweans and so on often assist people of their own language, religion or origin with business deals, favourable job applications and the like. In poor suburbs, criminal gangs often form in every group to use muscle to help compete for resources.

Immigrants are usually a more enterprising subset of the population from which they come. They generally realise they have to work extremely hard to thrive in their new country and their community networks are usually very strong. Majority local communities often do not do as well as immigrant or minority ones; they are seldom as organised or close-knit. When competition for resources is extreme, as in South Africa, jealousy builds up and xenophobic and racist ideas becomes common, even though the enterprise of many immigrants helps create jobs and services. Gangs in the local community, especially in a society like ours which is already very violent, target immigrant communities. Low-level xenophobic violence becomes a chronic problem. This has been the situation in South Africa for some time. For example Somali immigrants have been frequently the victims of xenophobic attacks, often murderous ones, in Cape Town in the last few years. The Caledon Square group refugees have told me how they have been targeted by youths in Phillipi township for years. The situation is exacerbated by politicians, particularly local councillors, and journalists making comments which exacerbate xenophobia and racism, as well as the systematic oppression of immigrants by the state.

Soaring food and basic commodity prices have worsened poverty and the perceived competition within townships for resources in recent months. This could have increased the level of xenophobic violence.

At some point in the last two weeks, the number of xenophobic incidents reached a critical point, probably in Alexandra township in Johannesburg. When this happened, the visibility of the violence gave a green light to more and more gangs and individuals who had been considering xenophobic attacks, were prone to it, believed they could get away with it or occasionally took part in them. A domino effect ensued, first in one township and then across townships in Johannesburg and Pretoria and then across cities to Durban and Cape Town.

The above is surely not the full story and some commentators will pick holes in my argument, but it is a far better approximation of what happened than the Pahad brothers' one. Though now there is certainly the possibility of opportunistic politicians capitalising on hatred of immigrants to gain support and substantially worsen the situation.

Intergroup hatred and violence in a diverse society like South Africa has to be consciously confronted. Political leaders have to assume that by doing nothing each time a xenophobic or other hate-crime is committed, the situation can deteriorate into what we've seen in the last two weeks. The President, other political leaders, churches, mosques, synagogues, trade unions and civil society organisations have to speak out continuously against hate-crimes, day-to-day xenophobia and racism.

Yet many political leaders frequently make comments about immigrants being involved in crime, as Helen Zille did a week ago. President Mbeki's failure to recognise the crisis of governance in Zimbabwe means that instead of receiving Zimbabwean immigrants with empathy, they are too often greeted with hatred in townships. His racial invective also worsens matters by creating a consciousness that encourages race-based beliefs instead of rejecting them.

We also need policies that alleviate the burdens of immigration from the poor. Many of Cape Town's poor have migrated here, and continue to do so, from the Eastern Cape over several decades. They compete with newly arrived poor people from other countries. Unfettered competition breeds hate in these conditions; state intervention to help all these communities is critical. We need policies that encourage settlement of new migrants in middle-class suburbs. And as at least one newspaper editor has opined, the Basic Income Grant, or similar, must be seriously considered. So should a large public works programme, not the Mickey Mouse one we currently have. None of this is easy.

Massacres frequently occurred under apartheid. A few were worse than the last two weeks. But what is different is that those massacres were a function of an almost universally reviled racist system. We could comfort ourselves in the knowledge that a better society lay ahead one day. The massacre and terror of the last two weeks is a step back, because that better society, our Constitutional Democracy, had arrived.

So how should we respond? We have to show that xenophobia is not a cultural value we accept. It was the failure of civil society to stand up sufficiently loudly against cultures of racism that helped lead to the genocides of the twentieth century. But we have a strong civil society in South Africa and there are good reasons to believe we can take the country in a more positive direction.

There are some promising signs. There have been several marches, demonstrations and rallies in Cape Town and Johannesburg condemning xenophobic violence or the destruction of democracy in Zimbabwe and there are more to come. Some townships, like Masiphumelela and parts of Khayelitsha, have already begun successful reintegration efforts. A TAC-sponsored advertisement run in the Daily Sun (South Africa's largest selling daily), Sunday Times and Sunday World, signed by many prominent South Africans, calling for an end to the violence helps send a strong message that what has happened is unacceptable and that communities need to stop it from repeating.

Most promising is that out of the volunteer humanitarian relief effort that began at 122 Longmarket Street and in Khayelitsha's TAC office last Friday night are the seeds of a renewed political consciousness. Already there is action to develop a Social Justice Coalition Against Violence and Crime based on principles around which civil society can unite. The disillusionment with our failed politicians must be accompanied by active and sustained engagement by ordinary people to demand better political accountability and leadership. Most importantly we must demand policies that reduce the inequality and poverty that are the foundation of what has just happened. That is the only way we can improve South Africa's tragic politics.

- Immigrants and Refugees

- Immigrants and Refugees

Source URL (retrieved on *2016/06/29 - 12:21am*): http://tac.org.za/community/node/2350