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Government must acknowledge and address Xenophobia in Cape Town

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1. In 2008 xenophobic violence swept across South Africa, leaving 62 people dead and more than 100 000 people displaced. The State?s reaction was beleaguered by a slow humanitarian response, a lack of information regarding incidents on the ground, and failures to adequately prepare for and deal with mass-displacement; all exacerbated by infighting between the various spheres of government.

2. Xenophobic sentiment, harassment and violence has persisted, albeit in a more sporadic and less organized manner. The biggest crisis in the Western Cape to happen since took place in November 2009 when approximately 2500 immigrants (largely Zimbabweans) were displaced in De Doorns. Since 2008, we have received regular reports of isolated intimidation and destruction of property affecting foreign nationals in areas across Khayelitsha. More recently, rumours have circulated claiming that immigrants would be attacked once the Football World Cup came to a close. The origins of these rumours are uncertain, but it is clear that they are not baseless, as we will illustrate below. The argument that they are self-fulfilling comes as little consolation to the thousands of immigrants around Cape Town and their South African friend?s and neighbours? who are now living in fear.

3. After an incident in Makhaza in which at least three Somali owned stores were attacked immediately following South Africa?s dismissal from the World Cup last month; The Social Justice Coalition (SJC), Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and Equal Education and (EE) decided to run workshops with staff and members to discuss xenophobia and how it could be combated. We have been engaging with broader civil society networks and forums, but our joint work has been limited to Khayelitsha, an area badly affected by violence in 2008 and an area in which we have existing grassroots networks which enable us to effectively reach the wider community. During this work it was found that fear of attacks after the World Cup was indeed very prevalent (amongst both locals and immigrants), and that many immigrants were being directly and indirectly threatened and intimidated.

4. In addition to trying to prevent violence by encouraging communities to stand against xenophobia, we have been using our networks to monitor xenophobic activity in the community. Regular reports of widespread xenophobic criminal activity began reaching us on Sunday evening. Since then, we have learnt of at least 15 incidents in Khayelitsha, all of which have been reported to Khayelitsha Police and the Disaster Management Centre. The majority of the incidents entailed the looting of Somali-owned shops by roving gangs ranging from 10 to 30 individuals. This happened in a variety of locations across Khayelitsha, including Kuyasa, R and L Sections, TR, TQ & QQ Sections, M, BM & V Sections, Makhaza 33 Section and SST Section in Town 2. Intimidation - and attacks on the property - of Zimbabwean and Malawian citizens was also reported. In most cases the owners of the shops targeted pre-emptively responded to threats by vacating their homes and premises before the attacks occurred. On Tuesday, almost all Somali owned stores were found to be abandoned.

5. As mentioned, our activities have been largely restricted to Khayelitsha. There have however also been reports of attacks on foreign-owned shops in Wallacedene, Du Noon, Ocean View, Nyanga and Philipi. There has been significant displacement in Cape Town, with nearly 1000 displaced Somalis allegedly looking for sanctuary in Belville after fleeing their homes. This pattern seems to have also extended across the Western Cape, with incidents reported in Grabouw, Klapmuts, Delft, Wellington and Mbekweni. In Mbekweni the attacks were apparently especially serious,

and resulted in injury to a small number of foreign nationals and police officers. Daniella Ebenezer - spokesperson for provincial disaster management - said 70 immigrants had sought refuge on Sunday night at the Mbekweni police station and 22 at Wellington SAPS.

6. The Police have in general responded quickly and effectively under difficult conditions to violence in Khayelitsha which has contributed in part to the relative calm Khayelitsha since Tuesday.

7. We are however most distressed by Government?s failure to acknowledge the xenophobic nature of recent attacks and by extension address the fear felt by countless immigrants who have been threatened or directly affected.

8. On 9 July Minister of Police and Convenor of the Inter-ministerial Committee on Xenophobia Nathi Mthethwa spoke at a Xenophobia Summit in Khayelitsha in which he cautioned ?that this alarmist phobia by those who fuel these rumours is intended to divert attention of the world from our success and celebratory mood?. On Monday ? while attacks were underway - President Jacob Zuma noted that he was "not certain whether there have been threats of xenophobia ? there have been rumours that have been reported".

9. In our view, it appears that senior police and the intelligence services have failed to properly brief President Zuma and the cabinet. Many senior officials appear reluctant to use the term ?xenophobia? in the hope that this will result in violence subsiding.

10. We call on Local, Provincial and National Government to immediately recognize that individuals around Cape Town and the Western Cape are being targeted based on their nationality. We especially call on President Zuma to lead and support efforts to prevent attacks on stateless people from other African countries. At this time it is inconsequential to question whether the original rumours were devious or based on an illegitimate threat, or whether these acts are being perpetrated out of hate or a desire to opportunistically commit criminal acts. None of this detracts from the fact that a specific group of people is being targeted, and are very much in need of particular protection. The abundance of reports of threats and intimidation, and violent destruction of property belonging to foreign nationals compels Government to recognize this, and plan and act accordingly.

11. The overwhelming majority of people in our communities want safety and security for all and have no desire to harm people from other countries. The World Cup demonstrated several very important facts ? government provided leadership and resources, our people responded enthusiastically, crime was curbed, South Africans supported all our African teams and visitors. We must use this unity of purpose to address safety and security for all people irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, class or nationality.

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