

Illegal immigrants touch nerves of South Africa

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SPECIAL REPORT BY XINHUA CORRESPONDENTS

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JOHANNESBURG (Xinhua) -- The forthcoming AU summit on refugees, to be held in Kampala, Uganda on Thursday and Friday, should have special significance for South Africans, who are notoriously hostile to people coming illegally from other parts of the continent.

In May last year this hostility flared up into rioting which left 62 people dead in several South African cities.

Since then the violence has subsided but tensions still simmer.

To many people this does not make sense.

South Africa was synonymous with discrimination during the apartheid years of racial segregation.

Yet xenophobia has flourished in the new South Africa, much to the distress of authorities.

Every year, thousands of Africans fleeing war and economic hardship make a perilous journey - their sights set on a better life in the regional powerhouse, South Africa.

A 2004 study published by the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) said:

"The ANC government, in its attempts to overcome the divides of the past and build new forms of social cohesion ... embarked on an aggressive and inclusive nation- building project.

"One unanticipated by-product of this project has been a growth in intolerance towards outsiders.

"Violence against foreign citizens and African refugees has become increasingly common and communities are divided by hostility and suspicion."

For the survey, citizens of most Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries were interviewed.

SADC member states are Angola, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Among all these nations, South Africans were found to harbour the harshest anti-foreigner sentiment, with 21 per cent of South Africans in favour of a complete ban on entry by foreigners and 64 per cent in favour of strict limitations on the numbers allowed.

The next highest proportion of respondents in favour of a total ban on foreigners were in neighbouring Namibia and Botswana, at 10 per cent.

This may suggest that South African xenophobic attitudes spread across its borders.

South African government officials and politicians, when they do speak about xenophobia, frequently emphasize the need for tolerance.

Some go further and stress the debt of gratitude owed to fellow Africans because of the support their countries gave to South Africans who were fighting against apartheid in earlier years.

Yet at a lower level, African immigrants are not well received by police and immigration officials.

The Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) surveyed attitudes among police officers in the areas around Johannesburg, South Africa's biggest cities.

Most of the police, 87 per cent of respondents, believed that most undocumented immigrants in Johannesburg were involved in crime.

So they thought the foreigners were criminals, even though there was no statistical evidence to substantiate the perception.

Some analysts argued that such views, combined with the vulnerability of illegal aliens, led to abuse, including violence and extortion.

In a March 2007 meeting with home affairs minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, a representative of Burundian refugees in Durban claimed immigrants could not rely on police for protection but instead found police mistreating them, stealing from them and making unfounded allegations that they sell drugs.

Two years earlier, at a similar meeting in Johannesburg, Mapisa-Nqakula had admitted that refugees and asylum seekers were mistreated by police with xenophobic attitudes.

The influx of illegal immigrants into South Africa has been exacerbated by poor living conditions in neighbouring Zimbabwe.

A focal point for them over several years has been the Central Methodist Church in Johannesburg.

In March this year the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees organized for them to be registered and relocated.

Citizens of Johannesburg were astonished to hear that 2,563 people were living in the church complex, which was not built for the purpose.

Persistent reports of crime, sexual abuse and improper use of pavements for ablution, only increased local animosity.

Last month the provincial Social Development Department said it was in the process of compiling a report on allegations of sexual abuse at the church.

To date the relocation has not been completed. One of the health problems associated with illegal immigration is the spread of the AIDS virus.

About 5.6 million South Africans are infected with HIV.

Immigrants with enough awareness to seek help and advice have a difficult time.

Melita Sunjie, a researcher at the Pretoria office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said:

"Refugees are regarded with suspicion in South Africa and are as a result discriminated against and barely integrated into society, let alone HIV and AIDS initiatives."

Because most immigrants are in the country illegally, they cannot accurately be counted.

The South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) estimated that their number at between three million and five million.

Last year, following attacks on immigrants in Alexandra outside Johannesburg, the SAIRR urged the government to reconsider its policies on African immigrants.

The SAIRR said that so called "illegal" African immigrants had become a permanent feature of South Africa's population.

The institute's deputy Chief Executive Frans Cronje said there were up to five million and "this makes them equal in number to South Africa's entire white population".

Cronje said that the government policy had to take this into account and should ideally accord some form of legal standing to African immigrants,

although this risked a further inflow of immigrants.

He said that it was not in South Africa's interests to have an "illegal" population the size of the African immigrant population.

Another institute spokesperson on the issue Mapeete Mohale said that such a change in policy would be in the interests of both the immigrants and South African citizens.

Legal standing for African immigrants would allow them to be registered and their numbers monitored.

It would also allow them easier access to the police and the justice system when their rights were infringed, particularly in cases where such abuses took place at the hands of the police.

The police would in turn have a better chance of tracking down those immigrants allegedly involved in crimes.

Access to banking and other services would also cut the risks that they were targeted for reasons of robbery.

Mohale said that negative perceptions of illegal immigrants did not take into account that they were consumers of South African goods and services.

Their numbers made them a significant market, particularly in the informal sector.

That benefit alone probably outweighed the costs commonly associated with such immigrant populations.

Mohale added that in a country short of skills, the teaching qualifications and other skills of particularly Zimbabwean immigrants should be harnessed.

Mohale emphasized, however, that their "illegal" status made them easy targets for robbery, violence, and xenophobia.

On the attacks in Alexandra, Mohale said that the institute was not surprised that the xenophobia had again reared its head considering the inappropriate nature of policy responses to the fact that African immigrants were now a permanent feature of South Africa's population.

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