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**Xenophobia and Violence in South Africa:  
A desktop study of the trends and a scan of explanations offered**

**Presented by Prof Simon Bekker**

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# ***Executive Summary***

Xenophobia and Violence in South Africa : a desktop study of the trends  
and a scan of explanations offered.

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## Products

Two separate accounts have been produced:

1. A 57 page written report the table of contents of which is given below, and
2. A Compact Disc entitled '*Diffusion of violent xenophobic events in South Africa from 10 May to 30 June 2008: data assembled from the South African print media*' which is an electronic supplement to this written report. It employs PowerPoint as a mapping tool and displays the names, locations and dates of xenophobic events before 10 May 2008 as well as during the first, middle and final phases of the May-June series under scrutiny.

### *Table of Contents of the Written Report*

1. Introduction.
2. Cross-border migration of Africans into South Africa post 1994
3. Xenophobia in South Africa before the May and June series of violent events.
4. The development of a conceptual framework within which to analyse violent collective behaviour.
5. Identification and summary of explanations offered for xenophobic violence in South Africa during May and June 2008 series of outbursts.
6. The development of a chronology of xenophobic outbursts during May and June 2008.
7. Case studies of four outburst events in the Western Cape
8. Conclusion
9. Appendices

## The background

During the second half of May 2008, a series of short violent outbursts took place in neighbourhoods of numerous South African cities and towns. The violence during these outbursts was perpetrated by civilians, and was inflicted on the property and the person of civilians. The perpetrators were largely young poor black South African men, the targets largely the property and businesses of foreign African nationals as well as these civilians themselves. The series of outbursts began in Gauteng and spread about a week after the first serious event to other urban areas of the country. This geographic spread of outbursts

was accompanied by widespread coverage by the mass media of these events and their possible causes. Since the reaction of many of the victims was flight from their residential areas, a series of temporary refugee camps were established. During the aftermath of these outbursts, more than 20 000 refugees were accommodated in this way, numerous African foreign nationals were reported to have left the country, and government urged refugees in camps to return to the residential areas from which they had fled since these were said to have calmed down.

### **The objective of the report**

The aim of the report is to develop an historical account of the run-up to, and current process of, xenophobic violence in South Africa during the period May to June 2008. Research was conducted by a small project team and is essentially desktop – collecting information from secondary sources rather than from fieldwork. In addition, since the project was of a short three-month duration, the focus is exclusively on the perpetrators of the violent xenophobic outbursts and on their actions, not on the victims and refugees during and after the series of outbursts.

### **The methods employed** comprised:

- developing a conceptual framework within which to place this account and by using data from secondary sources (largely from the print media) to flesh it out;
- conducting a scan of explanations for outbreaks of xenophobic violence in general, and the 2008 series of South African events, in particular; and
- conducting preliminary qualitative fieldwork comprising focus group discussions with Western Cape residents in four residential neighbourhoods (four case studies) where such outbreaks occurred as well as interviews with selected individuals in the Northern Cape and adding these data to secondary data that have been assembled.

### **Main conclusions** include:

(a) The 135 identified events that took place during the period mid-May to mid-June 2008 are new in their display neither of xenophobic sentiment nor of violence against the persons and property of African migrant families and communities. What appears to be new is the intensity and the spatial spread of xenophobic violent outbursts during a short period of time – effectively one month.

(b) Violent outbursts may be classified in terms of scope of violence and duration into either serious or minor events. The nature and frequency of outbursts differed during the three

phases of the series: Outbursts during the *First phase* (10-20 May) were confined to informal settlements and townships in Gauteng and comprised more than half all serious events. Outbursts during the *Middle phase* (21 to 31 May) spread to other provinces, the Western Cape and KZN in particular. The vast majority of these events were minor outbursts involving attacks on property rather than on persons. Outbursts during the *Final phase* (month of June) reflected a diminishment in the frequency of events as well as a (late) diffusion to new provinces, the Free State in particular. All events moreover were located in urban areas.

(c) The diffusion of outbursts from one settlement to another and from one province to another was driven by rumours spread by mass media and word of mouth. These rumours were similar across both space and time. Accordingly, a form of 'copycatting' took place -, the transmission of violent xenophobic events rooted in the diffusion by the media of credible rumours associated not only with the events themselves but also with official and police reports and with politicians' pronouncements. The recurrence of events during May and June in approximately one half of all recorded places where an earlier xenophobic event took place points to *continuity* in the process of the perpetration of violence against strangers in underprivileged urban residential areas. In the middle and final phases, as news of the violent assaults and attacks in Gauteng spread, many foreigners decided to flee their settlements and shops in anticipation of possible attacks, leaving properties that were subsequently vandalised and looted.

### **An overarching explanation of what happened.**

The report includes in its concluding section an outline of an overarching explanation for the May and June 2008 outbursts, an outline comprising hypotheses that need empirical validation.

Such an overarching explanation requires four parts :

- Explanations focused on external structural causes,
- Explanations focused on factors directly related to specific outbursts,
- Explanations for the diffusion of outburst events, and
- Explanations for perceptions concerning the forces of law and order and concerning government.

Before such an explanation can be presented with confidence, more information needs to be assembled, particularly about the nature and scope of both the aggression and the humiliation carried by young informal settlement South African men who appear to have been the force behind the series of xenophobic violent events during May and June 2008.

The nature of issues that need further research include:

- the meanings given to events by outburst perpetrators on the ground,
- risk aversion in the selection of their targets,
- their perception of police activities, and
- the reversal of humiliation through violent action.