We’re Still Here
The Aftermath of Xenophobia in Durban

A photographic exhibition presented by The Centre For Civil Society
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Introduction

In May of 2008, 62 people believed to be immigrants or foreigners were killed by armed groups in several South African cities marking the most significant incidence of bloodshed since the overthrow of the apartheid system in 1994. Thousands more were attacked and driven from their homes.

Of South Africa’s 49 million inhabitants, it is estimated that 3-5 million are foreign nationals, the majority of which hail from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Nigeria as well as many registered refugees from the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo. While the recent violence was the worst incident to date, tensions between immigrants and South Africans have long been simmering in townships and informal settlements outside major cities, which are plagued by poverty, unemployment, and a scarcity of resources. Local South Africans blame foreigners for fuelling high unemployment and crime in these areas. Some experts contend that the xenophobic anger and violence can most easily be explained by economic factors. In a situation of extreme scarcity, it is unsurprising to see marginalized groups displacing the blame for their own anxieties on even more precarious individuals and groups.

While poverty and lack of resources certainly fuel the fire, the implications of the undeniably xenophobic slant of the violence and related rhetoric are integral to understanding the problem. Xenophobia is certainly not a new phenomenon in South Africa, with its history of apartheid rule in the 20th century. The tendency to define and devalue the “Other” was a staple of the apartheid-era state where the “Other” was the non-white South African majority. Today’s violence implies a redefinition of “Other” in South Africa. In addition, in creating the devalued category of “Other” there is an implicit creation of an opposing “Us.” Under the repressive apartheid regime, there was no question who fell in the “Us” category, but in post-apartheid South Africa, who should be included and who should not is being (violently) contested. Particular definitions of citizenry are being asserted and affirmations are being made about who belongs and who has legitimate claims on the state and its limited resources. In many poor communities, immigrants have been made collectively liable for economic and security concerns of marginalized South Africans based on “Us” vs. the “Other” conceptualization of citizenship. The rash of xenophobic violence in May 2008 was a tangible manifestation of these sentiments.
The outbursts of xenophobic violence were most pronounced in the townships of South Africa’s three largest cities: Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. Most media attention focused on Johannesburg and Cape Town while the Durban attacks were largely overlooked. Although serious, the initial xenophobic attacks in Durban were not as severe as in Johannesburg and Cape Town due to a coordinated police presence in previously identified ‘hot spots’ which helped to curtail violence in some locations. Yet for all its pre-emptive coordination, the relief effort in the aftermath was riddled with chaos, confusion and denial.

Although the attacks are over, the effects xenophobia do not so quickly evanesc. The sentiments that bred and fed it still run deep. In addition, in the face of a highly uncoordinated relief effort, many of those affected have slipped through the cracks, forgotten.

The Exhibition

The photographs displayed in this exhibition were collected during a research project carried out by the Centre for Civil Society, based at University of KwaZulu-Natal, seeking to understand responses to the xenophobic crisis in the Durban area and the role of civil society, philanthropy and the state in terms of crisis mitigation and the facilitation of long term solutions to xenophobia.

The photographs aim to capture the sense of marginalisation and alienation suffered by victims of xenophobia in South Africa in a way that the written research report cannot. The photographs attempt, through the visual medium, to show that the effects of xenophobic hate and violence are experienced much more directly by the poor and that xenophobia, in fact, perpetuates poverty and suffering.

Although some of the photographs were taken by Centre for Civil Society scholar Oliver Meth, many of them were taken by displaced foreign nationals themselves who have kindly granted us permission to use them in this exhibition.

More specifically, the exhibition chronicles the situation and struggles of a group of 47 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi in the aftermath of the xenophobic attacks in Durban. The majority of the photos were taken by Delphin Mmbibya, one of the affected refugees. His unique perspective gives insight into their plight, telling their story with the honesty of lived experience.
On the afternoon of 10 July 2008, well over a month after the initial xenophobic attacks, a group of those displaced by xenophobic violence pitched up at the City Hall to plead for assistance. Previously they had found refuge in Glenwood Church for one month. When the church could no longer house them, the pastors accompanied the displaced people back to City Hall. The government agreed to pay ten days lodging at a local shelter, but this was only a temporary reprieve – the displaced people were turned out after a fortnight for failure to pay. Thus, they found themselves once again on the steps of City Hall.

“Till now, government washes its hands to help me,” notes one of the victims of xenophobia. Here police standby as desperate women wait for some sort of resolution. For many, the process of being displaced yet again brought back bitter memories of experiences fleeing violence in Eastern DRC.

Just past 3 p.m., disregard turned to violence as confusion erupted. Having nowhere to turn, the victims of xenophobia refused to leave City Hall sparking a violent response from police.
In the violent scuffle that ensued, victims of xenophobia, including some pregnant women, were beaten and others, including children, were sprayed with teargas.

The baton of a police officer is seen in the foreground as he detains a displaced woman outside City Hall.

PART II: A night at City Hall
10-11 July 2008
photos by Delphin Mmbibya

Following the violent interaction with police in the afternoon, the displaced people were left outside City Hall, where they passed the night. Here, displaced man huddles under blankets as he braves the cold.
Since resettling in South Africa several years ago, most Congolese refugees had been successful finding homes and employment and rebuilding their lives in Durban. With the onset of the xenophobic attacks however, most were forced to leave everything behind. Seen here, the few belongings that the victims were able to carry with them when they fled their homes in May were left strewn in the open as they slept.

A lone man sleeps on the street outside Durban’s City Hall. Many refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo were forced to leave their families behind when they fled the violence in their country. On the run again, this man finds himself alone once more on a cold July night.

A displaced man patrols the makeshift sleeping quarters of the other victims. Someone must stand guard over people and property as men, women, and children sleep out in the open on the streets of downtown Durban.
PART III: The drop-off
11 July 2008
*photos by Delphin Mmbibya*

After spending the night in front of City Hall on the evening of 10 July, the xenophobia-affected refugees were transferred to Albert Park, located in a particularly unsafe area of central Durban, by police on 11 July. The spires of a nearby church marquee are seen in the background.

Here, refugees file out of the police wagon under the highway on the outskirts of the park. The police vehicle used to transport the refugees to Albert Park is typically used to carry delinquents and felons en route to detention facilities. Although they committed no crime, the men, women and children affected by xenophobia were detained like common criminals outside City Hall and taken away where, like a convict in prison, they would be out of sight and out of mind.

In Johannesburg and Cape Town refugee camps were set up to house those displaced by xenophobia, yet in Durban no such facilities were put into place. Here, confusion meets despair as those affected are abandoned in the park. A young boy looks on as a girl stoops to comfort a crying woman.
“I don’t know where I can go now,” comments one refugee. Having witnessed gross human rights abuses in their own country, Congolese refugees come to South Africa looking for security. But even here, peace eludes them.

On 12 July, the morning after being dropped at Albert Park, the displaced people awake for the second time on the streets. In the cool clear light of morning, the unrest of the previous days seems to have dissipated, leaving dejection and desolation. Georgien Sou’s (center) bandaged hands cover the teddy bear she holds in her lap – a small comfort on a cold morning.

PART IV: The civil society response
12 July – 8 September 2008
photos by Delphin Mmbibya

Responding to a desperate situation, an anonymous philanthropist donated large marquees to house the refugees in Albert Park after they were unceremoniously dumped there by police. From 11 July, the refugees in Albert Park have relied solely on donations and support from philanthropists and civil society organizations.
The morning sun streams through the window of the marquee as women busy themselves with housework on 11 August 2008. This day marks one month since the refugees were brought to Albert Park and still no durable solution to the situation is in sight.

Having left behind their homes and livelihoods, first in fleeing the war in DRC and then once again during the xenophobic attacks, the refugees are left in a desperate material condition. Charitable donations, like the ones being unloaded from the truck in this photo, are integral to their day-to-day survival.

Although in Johannesburg and Cape Town the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) set up camps for those displaced by xenophobia, the City of Durban did not allow for the construction of such camps claiming the crisis was not severe. Then, on 8 September 2008, the City took its policy of ignorance regarding the xenophobia issue a step further by calling for the removal of the privately donated marquees, thereby taking active steps to block civil society relief efforts.

In the foreground, a woman attends to household chores outside the Albert Park encampment. For her, an already insecure existence is about to become even more uncertain – behind her, men begin to dissemble and remove the marquee tents that house the refugees.
Georgien Sou sits in Albert Park on the morning of September 11, looking as bruised and broken as her makeshift shelter. This day marks 2 months since the refugees were abandoned at Albert Park. Following the dismantling of the marquees, the refugees constructed crude accommodations to protect themselves from the elements.

Here a family huddles inside the tent they have constructed of plastic and refuse bags. The shelter is barely large enough to crawl inside and sleep.

“What was the plan of government to beat me and leave me in this park?” asks one Albert Park refugee, clearly exasperated by the stresses of the current situation. Surveying the camp, seen here, it is obvious that the living conditions in Albert Park are substandard.
Gesturing toward the campsite, one refugee comments, “See here, this is violence. To take tents is violence.” He explains how perceives the actions of the government to be an abuse of the children and a disrespect of human rights.

Life in Albert Park is difficult enough on warm sunny days, but it becomes nearly unbearable when the rains set in, flooding the makeshift shelters. There is no reprieve as the wind whips and the dirt below mattresses and bedding turns to mud.

The shadow of the photographer is seen amidst the plastic shelters as he looks on as a woman does her washing. Behind her, a line of clean laundry is strung up to dry in the park. Daily tasks, such as washing, are extremely difficult in Albert Park where the refugees have no access to water or sanitation facilities.
Jonh Kashindi, 4, awakes in his home on a late September morning. The precarious living conditions take a worse toll on vulnerable children. In addition to the rough accommodation and constant lack of security, the children are also falling behind academically having been out of school since May. Parents are adamant about the need for a long-term, sustainable solution that considers the future of the children.

Once professionals in their own country – including trained electricians, journalists, and aspiring politicians- seen here, men stripped of their agency and forced into idleness by conflict gather in the camp to debate possible solutions to their common problems.

“"I don't need any help, any money – only physical protection." The refugees see the reintegration package offered by UNHCR as a gross misunderstanding of the problem. Aside from the fact that the meager funds are not enough to find accommodation, the refugees insist that the problem is not money. The problem is security and human rights. There is a consciousness, nourished by lived experience, among the refugees that xenophobia is not just the isolated May attacks. That was the catalyst, a flashpoint. Xenophobia runs much deeper, threatening them daily.
PART VI: The crisis continues
October 2008
photos by Oliver Meth

Ayuba Mmbibya, 2, cradles a lost shoe outside the plastic shelters of the Albert Park encampment. Some of the young children living in Albert Park, like Ayuba, were born in South Africa after their parents fled the DRC. Caught between two nations, they belong to neither. Because they were not born there, they cannot be considered Congolese citizens, but because their parents are not South African, neither are they awarded citizenship by the ‘rainbow nation’.

This photo, taken in mid-October, shows the plastic shelters in the shadow of the sign marking the entrance to the park. On the morning of November 1, 2008 these shelters were destroyed by Metro Police in a surprise demolition operation.

A playful Jonh Kashindi, 4 - seen here with Ayuba Mmbibya - smiles mischievously at the camera outside his plastic shelter in October. When the police came to demolish the shelters on November 1, Jonh was nearly hit with an ax used by police to rip the plastic shelter that covered him as he slept. Following the scuffle with police, his mother, Aziza, had to be hospitalized.
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