

SADC-CNGO

Southern African Development Community – Council of Non-Governmental Organisations

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Press Statement: For Immediate Release

SADC Council of NGOs Condemns Xenophobia – Warns of Greater Crisis Unless SADC Leaders Listen to the People!

The recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa must be condemned in the strongest possible terms by all peace loving people. The events have erupted from simmering anger and hostility in South Africa as people lash out in violence against other Africans for what they perceive as the undue advantages they enjoy.

It appears that a significant section of South Africans are expressing their displeasure at their own lack of opportunities and laying the blame on so-called “foreigners”.

The warning signs have been there for sometime. The 2008 outbreak of xenophobia shocked all of us. Then in January 2015 shopkeepers and non-nationals were the victims of looting, theft and violence in Gauteng. The tragic history has shown a serious lack of proper, consistent and principled leadership on the part of the South African government to combat xenophobia. The responses, when they happened, have all been after-the-fact and have often lacked the sustained seriousness that is required.

Spurred on by the comments of the Zulu King this violence has now exploded in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Fellow Africans from Malawi, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique, the Congo and other countries have been brutalised and are forced to leave their homes, businesses and possessions as they flee in fear of their lives. The gratuitous and barbaric nature of these attacks serves to underline real social tensions and a breakdown of social cohesion arising from growing poverty, unemployment, inequality and sense of despair in South Africa.

South Africa is a country that has reached a tipping point: it must either return to the path of democracy, rule of law and justice for all or unravel in violence, lawlessness and anarchy. The government of South Africa must face the responsibility of closing the gap of social injustice and political grievances coming from its citizens who are disaffected and disenchanted.

The various causes and complexities of the current xenophobia must not blind us to the need for urgent action: *“We can analyse this situation and its root causes – which is of course vital- but the moment requires deliberate action which demonstrates that our governments truly understand and are capable of listening to our people.*

A clarion call must be made to the South African people reminding them of the sacrifices made by their fellow Africans in the neighbouring countries and beyond in support of the freedom they enjoy today. South Africans must understand that many fellow Africans are not coming to South Africa to bring crime or steal but are fleeing conditions of real poverty, conflict and dictatorship. This requires all of us in SADC and Africa to improve the conditions of our people together.” said the Executive Director of the SADC Council of NGOs, Mr Boichoko Ditlhake.

“What we are seeing is the explosion of built up frustration across the board. Black South Africans are tired of being at the bottom of society where others live in great luxury. Other Africans are tired of being the scapegoat and victims of the anger and violence from South Africans.”

“As the SADC Council of NGOs we have been actively campaigning for all SADC governments to remove the impediments to the free movement of people in the region by ratifying and domesticating the SADC Protocol on the Facilitation of Free Movement of Persons. We have been campaigning for the removal of unnecessary restrictions and the simplification of cross-border travel and trade. The answer to xenophobia is the fullest freedom of our people to make and take the economic opportunities that arise from regional integration and inter-regional trade. The goal of SADC and its predecessor, the Frontline State, was always to achieve collective economic self-sufficiency. Today regional integration is dominated by elite interests and not driven forward to enable our people to meet their needs.”

Going further he said: *“Our leaders make pronouncements and declarations. However they fail to act once they return to their countries. We have seen the great victory of black students from all our countries as they mobilised at UCT with the ‘Rhodes must fall’ movement. This social mobilisation of students shows us that fundamental transformation can occur if we are organised and conscious of the historic barriers created not only to keep Africans poor and dispossessed but also divided: by ethnicity, tribe, language and culture. For Rhodes and his entire legacy to be dismantled our leaders must listen to the people. The legacy of migrant labour must be overcome. Our people must trade, move and interact across borders. We remain convinced that the Free Movement of Free People is a necessary condition to avoid these types of attacks from ever happening again.”*

The SADC Council of NGOs calls on SADC to place the issue of xenophobic attacks and the free movement high on the agenda of its forthcoming special Summit in Harare, Zimbabwe (29-30 April 2015). It furthermore urges governments to refrain from making populist statements and inflammatory actions to exploit the current crisis for political gain. SADC CNGO urges all member states, particular South Africa, to convene a SADC multi-stakeholder forum to combat xenophobia, tribalism and promote respect for cultural diversity.

The SADC Council of NGOs will rally with its allies in the faith community, trade unions and social movements to do all that is necessary to prevent a further escalation of these horrific attacks, while it seeks long-term interventions to prevent any future recurrence. We extend our heartfelt condolences to the families and loved ones of all the victims of these senseless attacks. While we mourn with them, we will move with great determination and speed to ensure that justice for all is their lasting legacy.



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