

## P M LIVE INTERVIEW, CATHERINE CROSS, CPEG, 25 MAY:

### COULD XENOPHOBIA STEM FROM THE HOSTEL-DWELLING POPULATION?

South Africa has a long history of xenophobia, though until recently there have been only a few major outbursts of violence against foreigners. The xenophobic attacks probably do not stem from the hostels on their own, or even as the main anti-foreign constituency. Instead, the hostel population is part of the affected population. That is, it's not the hostels themselves, but rather the fact that very many of the poor who are affected by the arrival of large numbers of foreign workers are concentrated in the hostels because they have no place else to go.

This is a rural-born population with limited education and low skills, often now middle-aged and unable to move upward in the economy or find good-quality jobs. This constituency of the working poor is stuck at the bottom end of the economy with no ladder to help them out – many or most have seen little improvement since 1994, and many have faced a deterioration in their circumstances.

### WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE HOSTEL POPULATION OVER PAST 14 YEARS?

The situation for hostel dwellers has been very bad since the independence elections in 1994. Many of the surviving migrant workers' hostels are being closed down or converted to family accommodation, as it is thought that there is no longer any need for them. But for the rural migrant workers who have no other urban housing and still use and need the hostels, there is often no maintenance provided any longer, putting their accommodation into a decayed condition, with dripping walls and non-functional toilets.

The people who still live there are usually conservative, less educated rural-born men, who have been overlooked by delivery efforts and who see their limited prospects disappearing as their unskilled jobs decline in numbers. This is a migrant worker population, people who often live in thatched rondavels in their rural home districts, and who often feel forgotten in relation to an increasingly urbanized economy.

South African citizens in this situation have no place to go – either for housing or for participation in the general economy. They are often limited to disappearing unskilled jobs as economy shifts to knowledge work. When they resort to informal sector businesses instead, they may face serious additional competition from better educated foreigners with more experience of running a business.

The poor in this rural-born population face a self-perceived threat from better educated foreign workers being hired into these jobs below the union wage level dispensation. Throughout the world, employers will always put pressure on governments to admit numbers of cheap foreign workers who are not part of the labour dispensation – these workers allow them pay less to hire better qualified people. This kind of situation can act

to exclude the poverty end of the citizen population – in the United States, the presence of foreign workers is thought to depress the wages of the lowest-skilled by 3 percent, but in some categories the effect reaches 8 percent. In South Africa, the inflow of foreign workers has been much more sudden and has created serious stresses in the labour market for the poorest.

This category of foreign workers here is mostly coming in extra-legally, describing themselves as ‘border-jumpers’, who have to work without labour protection because they’re also desperate for work. This foreign-born grouping in South Africa has gone up in numbers from a low level to perhaps 2-3 million in the last 5-10 years.

This is a somewhat different population from the higher-skilled cross-border in-migrants who have arrived in the past few years – many of the more educated group have ASGISA skills that we desperately need, particularly in teaching and in some cases artisan skills. This higher-skilled group in itself is not the root of the problem among the very poor, especially if it can find the jobs it aspires to, and that South Africa needs to fill.

However, due to the illegality of cross-border in-migration in respect of many or most would-be immigrants, many of the highly educated people crossing the border illegally are working now in South Africa’s low-skilled jobs. Their arrival is likely to be perceived by our own struggling rural-born poor as unfair competition.

These are the people who have been hardest hit as employment in the large-farm sector has collapsed, leaving them with no prospects other than city unskilled jobs. Their need is for unskilled jobs which are disappearing. Government delivery to this grouping has not been as successful as it needs to be – if these workers are still in hostels it means they haven't obtained subsidy housing and they do not have decent quality jobs, and therefore they probably face very poor access to other services and infrastructure. They are very vulnerable in that they have been left behind by economic change, and their situation is often getting worse. Many feel seriously threatened, and as if no one in government is aware of their situation or is acting on their behalf.

## IS THIS A WAR OF THE POOR AGAINST THE VERY POOR? OR THE THIRD FORCE?

In this context, it's very painful for the South African government to face this kind of violence without an explanation, and it's natural for any government in this position to look for some one particular group or groups that can be identified as responsible. The real situation probably isn't this clear-cut.

The xenophobic violence South Africa is experiencing is unlikely to be from a Third Force, or from the political IFP who have often been blamed – we need to note that there has been a high level of xenophobic violence in the Cape, where the IFP doesn't have much presence, but where there are many low-skilled workers chasing a limited number of low-skilled jobs.

A key point is that the IFP voters are often part of this rural-born low-skilled poverty constituency which now depends mainly on the remaining unskilled jobs in the urban sector. People in this category are concentrated particularly in the hostels, but that's not the only place they can be found. The violence itself is not limited to the hostels, and it's likely to be spread much more widely through South Africa's poorest – not only in the hostels, but also in the shack settlements, and among the very poor in the townships.

We're hearing that the mobs who come to beat and dispossess foreigners sometimes take away with them even very small items, tiny quantities of food or very small possessions. This argues that the people involved in the violence are themselves very poor and probably hungry. It may also suggest that they believe they are taking back what is rightfully theirs, from people who have no right to have it.

The relatively sudden very large inflow of extra-legal cross-border migrants who come from the north desperate for any kind of job has left a war – or at least potential for a violent conflict of interest – that puts the low-skilled working poor who are citizens against the desperate in-migrant population from neighbouring countries. These in-migrants also have no place to go inside their home economies.

#### WHAT IS THE ROOT CAUSE? IS VIOLENCE BLURRING THE LINE FOR POLITICAL/CRIMINAL VIOLENCE?

The root cause of this violence is probably the shrinking in recent years of the sum total of unskilled and low-skilled jobs available to less-qualified South African citizens, which has happened as the national economy has changed shape under globalization and shifted toward becoming a knowledge economy that only offers jobs to the well-educated. This risky change in South Africa's profile for employment has now been intensified by the sudden inflow of large numbers of people from Africa to the north, who are often much better educated than the South African poor, and are also willing to work for very cheap wages at almost any job.

One of the biggest underlying problems here is the poor state of South African public education, which has been in the news recently. Research cited in the government's 15-Year Review exercise highlights the weak state of teaching at primary school level, which puts under-qualified people into university and does not produce the quality of graduates the economy needs. In relation to in-migration, weak schooling also fails to provide the very poor with the education ladder out of poverty that families all over South Africa identify as vital, and are scrimping to give to their children. That is, with public education still poisoned by the legacy of apartheid, South African citizens today often cannot compete head to head with foreign workers for the lower-skilled jobs that do exist.

In contrast, the school systems in other African countries may often be better, producing more employable graduates even while those economies do not offer them jobs. Zimbabwe itself is widely credited with the best public school system in Africa, and

Zimbabwean migrants can offer South Africa a remedy for many of the ASGISA skills shortages. However, because they are undocumented, many of these qualified workers seem to be filling low-quality jobs instead, which were formerly filled by South Africa's own impoverished citizens.

The kind of violence that can result is not either political or criminal, though there is no shortage of career criminals who become interested in fishing once the waters are troubled. Instead, the violence against foreigners in South Africa is best described as social violence – it derives to a great extent from the perception on the ground among the poor that the outsiders competing with them for jobs and benefits have no right to be where they are, or to participate in the South African economy without authorization to live and work in the country.

Particularly for this rural-born less-skilled constituency, the belief in the bedrock principles of the rural settlement system is still strong – and indigenous principles prescribe that no one is allowed to move from their own community to another without being authorized by the people in the place they want to move to. In rural communities, both the community authorities and the neighbours have a right to vet new people who want to move in, and to refuse any they think are dangerous or undesirable.

For cross-border migrants, this process is not feasible. In the cosmopolitan urban areas, there is usually no community institution that can vet and approve new people. Nevertheless the belief persists among the rural-born poor that people who move into a community situation without being screened and approved are fundamentally wrong, and do not have legitimate rights as residents under community law.

It follows in principle that such strangers can be kicked out as illegitimate entrants, and deprived of their gains. The human rights community in South Africa may be making a serious mistake in putting the xenophobia debate entirely in terms of international laws and conventions – these have no force on the ground, and are usually completely unknown to the people most affected by in-migration. Likewise, the international human rights position usually pays no attention to the community system of beliefs and laws – and is usually unaware of it as well.

At the same time, it is probable unwise to argue that job competition – the factor identified by the anti-migrant constituency itself as the main cause of the violence – is not a serious factor in what has happened. We have yet to assess how far South African citizens threatened by the disappearance of unskilled jobs may actually be pushed nearer to the brink by the arrival of large number of foreign workers who are themselves desperate enough work illegally for sub-union wages.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

There are a number of steps we can take. First is to educate – not just South Africa's poor and very poor, who feel the impact of cross-border migration the most, but also

administrators and policy-makers, and particularly the human rights community, who may not pay enough attention to what is legitimate in eyes of communities, and of the very poor who are not fully integrated into the new governance structures.

Beyond education, there is a need to address the situation of workers who are being left behind in the globalizing South African economy, and particularly to alleviate the real problems of job competition. It is not entirely clear how this last issue can better be addressed: job creation as such and economic expansion may not have enough effect on the low-skilled category, which is not likely to expand much in the future. However, more and better training and support for informal-sector entrepreneurship would be a step in this direction, as would more official attention to re-training and adult education for the very poor who lack formal qualifications.

In the interests of managing migration over the next ten years:

- **EDUCATION:** Educate officials and the public against xenophobia and toward ethnic/national inclusivity
- **SUPPORT FOR POOR WORKERS:** Training in entrepreneurship and job qualifications targeted on the rural-born poor beyond the youth category, and attention to spreading the benefits of subsidy housing deeper into this disadvantaged social fraction
- **LABOUR LEGISLATION:** Review the labour legislation that prejudices foreign workers for skilled jobs for which there are not enough South African qualified candidates, so as to build the economy while relieving competition at the low end
- **LABOUR RELATIONS MANAGEMENT:** Review options to bring less-skilled and undocumented workers inside South Africa's labour dispensation on some basis, so as to alleviate where possible the problem of low wage competition
- **RETENTION OF SKILLED FOREIGN WORKERS AGAINST ASGISA TARGETS:** Consider developing a package of measures aimed at stabilizing and retaining skilled migrants and their families, adapted particularly for Zimbabwean nationals
- **IMMIGRATION AND MANAGEMENT OF BORDERS:** Develop more effective border control and immigration systems capable of making entry decisions quickly and delivering solid migration data to decision-makers
- **CITIZENSHIP FOR THOSE WHO QUALIFY:** Look at the possibility of putting in place a route to citizenship for qualified in-migrants from elsewhere in Africa who have worked for extended periods in key sectors of the South African economy

- **DEVELOP SPECIFIC PLANS:** Review current legislation internationally to define best practice for migration management, and develop high-level plans for dealing with rising levels of cross-border population flows
- **IDENTIFY TRENDS IN MIGRATION:** Develop a clear picture of migration trends for Southern Africa, including documented and undocumented migration from the SADC neighbourhood.