

# Xenophobia: Africa must unite, not divide

By Ehi Braimah

Amid the diplomatic tensions between Nigeria and South Africa, another Nigerian named Ibeh Chika Simon, 42, died during a South Africa Police Service (SAPS) operation in Bellville, Cape Town, in Western Cape Province on July 23. Witnesses and community groups alleged he was tortured, beaten and suffocated with a plastic bag during the raid. Another Nigerian, Patrick Chuks Egwabor, was reportedly shot and injured during the same operation. Nigerian Consul-General in Johannesburg, Ninikanwa Okey-Uche, strongly condemned the death, and demanded a transparent, independent probe into recurring extrajudicial deaths involving security personnel. Nigerians and other African migrants are being killed and forced to leave South Africa arising from the resurgence of xenophobic violence which, clearly, is one of the greatest moral contradictions confronting post-apartheid Africa. Three decades after the dismantling of institutional racism, the country that inspired the world with Nelson Mandela's message of reconciliation is witnessing repeated attacks against fellow Africans whose only "crime" is seeking opportunities to work, trade and build better lives. Sentiment analysis indicates that the hostility directed at African migrants in South Africa is driven by a complex mix of extreme socio-economic frustrations, political scapegoating, inequalities, historical isolation, hunger, laziness, unemployment, and viral anti-immigrant activism. The local elections are due in November, and as South Africa prepares for the vote, political analysts and rival parties have heavily criticized Jacob Zuma's MK Party of fueling anti-immigrant sentiments. MK Party has been accused of weaponising public frustration over extreme unemployment, poverty and state failures to gain electoral

advantage. Recent campaigns by the March and March Movement and Operation Dudula, which demanded that foreign African nationals leave South Africa ahead of the June 30 deadline, represents not merely an attack on migrants but a direct assault on the ideals upon which modern Africa was built. While inflammatory rhetoric often targets Nigerians, Zimbabweans, Malawians, Mozambicans, Zambians, Ethiopians, Ghanaians, Somalis and other African nationals, it is striking that white immigrants and foreign investors rarely become the focus of such organized hostility. This selective outrage exposes the uncomfortable reality that the problem is not immigration alone; it is Afrophobia directed against fellow Africans. — South Africans who embrace xenophobic violence have become poor students of history. They appear to have forgotten the enormous sacrifices made by African countries during the long struggle against apartheid. Nigeria, in particular, stood firmly with South Africa when much of the world hesitated. Successive Nigerian governments contributed financially to the liberation struggle, imposed sanctions against the apartheid regime, offered scholarships to South African students in exile and mobilized international opinion against racial oppression. Millions of ordinary Nigerians voluntarily contributed through the Southern African Relief Fund, believing that the freedom of South Africa was the responsibility of all Africans.

Nigeria was not alone. Zambia provided sanctuary for liberation fighters. Tanzania hosted the headquarters of liberation movements. Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Botswana and many other African nations paid heavy economic and security costs because they stood on the side of justice. Across the continent, African governments

accepted refugees, financed resistance movements and defended South Africa's right to freedom in international forums. The vision that inspired these sacrifices was much bigger than the liberation of one country. Ghana's first President, Kwame Nkrumah, dreamed of a politically and economically united Africa capable of determining its own destiny. Nelson Mandela similarly believed that South Africa's freedom would remain incomplete unless the entire continent prospered in peace and solidarity. The African Union, which succeeded the Organization of African Unity, inherited this vision of



continental integration, cooperation and free movement. Today, that noble dream is under serious threat. When African migrants are hunted in townships, their businesses looted, their homes burnt and their families terrorized, Africa loses a part of its collective soul. The victims are not statistics. They are fathers, mothers, students, traders, artisans, professionals and entrepreneurs who have invested years of hard work in building livelihoods. Many possess valid immigration documents; work permits or permanent residence status. Yet, legality often provides little protection when mobs take the law into their own hands.

The humanitarian consequences are heartbreaking. Families are uprooted overnight; children abandon their education, and businesses painstakingly built over many years are destroyed within hours. Savings accumulated over decades disappear in acts of arson and looting. Many migrants return home traumatized, carrying nothing except painful memories of violence and rejection. Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique and several other African countries have repeatedly received distressed returnees who must begin life all over again. The Nigerian government has repeatedly expressed concern over the deaths of Nigerian nationals in violent attacks over the years, underscoring the urgent need for stronger protection and accountability. Regardless of the precise number, every life lost represents a profound tragedy and a reminder that no African should die simply because he or she chose to live or work in another African country.

The economic argument often advanced by xenophobic groups is equally flawed. Foreign African entrepreneurs frequently establish businesses in communities underserved by formal retail chains, create employment for local residents, pay taxes, rent commercial property and contribute to economic activity. Rather than causing unemployment, many become job creators. South Africa's unemployment crisis stems from deep structural economic challenges that cannot be solved by intimidating vulnerable migrants. Equally troubling is the rise of hate speech that portrays African migrants as criminals responsible for every social ill. Such dangerous generalizations inflame public anger and legitimize violence. Criminal behaviour should always be addressed through law enforcement against individuals, not through collective punishment based on nationality. The rule of law cannot coexist with mob justice. As African leaders prepare for the African Union Extraordinary Summit on Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Angola from August 29 – 30, xenophobia and Afrophobia deserve urgent attention. The African Union cannot remain silent while one of its founding principles is systematically undermined. The AU's Agenda 2063 envisions "An Integrated, Prosperous and Peaceful Africa." That aspiration cannot coexist with violent campaigns demanding that fellow Africans leave another African country. Moreover, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights guarantees dignity, equality before the law and protection from discrimination. The Protocol

relating to the African Economic Community and the African Continental Free Trade Area equally seek to deepen regional integration by facilitating the movement of people, goods, services and investment. Continental economic integration cannot flourish where fear and violence replace trust and cooperation. South Africa's government bears the primary responsibility for protecting everyone living within its borders, irrespective of nationality. Peaceful protests may be protected under democratic principles, but intimidation, incitement, destruction of property and mob violence are criminal acts that demand firm prosecution. Failure to hold perpetrators accountable only emboldens future attacks. Although President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa sent a delegation led by Ronald Lamola, the country's minister of International Relations and Cooperation to Abuja for diplomatic engagements over the attack on Nigerians, Ramaphosa should be told in clear terms that his government is not going far enough to solve the problem. There's no way South Africa can stand alone as an island, separated from the rest of Africa and an interconnected world. Nigeria's President, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, should be commended for showing restraint over the provocations from South Africa that undermine decades of cordial relations between both countries. How can a South African Minister be saying on national television that Nigeria should show them where the drug dens are? Governments across Africa must strengthen cooperation on migration management, documentation, intelligence sharing and employment policies. Migration is a global phenomenon that requires coordinated solutions, not xenophobia. Political leaders, religious institutions, civil society organizations, schools and the media must actively promote tolerance and remind younger generations of the shared history that united Africa against colonialism and apartheid. Africa's destiny lies not in division but in unity. Kwame Nkrumah's dream of continental integration and Nelson Mandela's vision of reconciliation remain as relevant today as ever. To betray fellow Africans through xenophobia is to betray the very struggle that delivered South Africa from apartheid. The answer to unemployment is economic reform, not hatred, and effective policing, not ethnic profiling, will address criminality. Cyril Ramaphosa must understand that accountable governance, not scapegoating and criminalizing vulnerable migrants, will reduce frustration among jobless South Africans. Africa cannot build a single market while destroying our common humanity. The African Union must speak with one voice against xenophobia and Afrophobia, demand accountability for perpetrators of violence and reaffirm that every African deserves dignity, security and equal protection under the law wherever they lawfully reside on the continent. History will judge Africa not only by how it defeated apartheid, but also by whether it refused to replace one form of intolerance with another. Africa must unite, not divide. That is the only path to fulfilling the dreams of Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandela and the founding fathers of African unity.