

Xenophobia and Nigeria's Foreign Policy: Beyond Outrage, Where Is the Strategic Response?

By Frank Odion Apokwu

The resurgence of xenophobic attacks against Nigerians and other African nationals in South Africa has once again exposed one of the continent's most persistent contradictions. While African leaders continue to champion regional integration, free movement of people, and continental solidarity through initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCTA) many Africans remain vulnerable to violence simply because they crossed a border in search of opportunity. For Nigeria, the recurring attacks raise a question that extends beyond the immediate humanitarian tragedy: Has the country's foreign policy lost the strategic influence and credibility required to protect its citizens abroad? Recent reports that the Nigerian government sought the intervention of the African Union (AU) have generated sharply divided opinions. Supporters argue that diplomacy remains the most responsible and effective means of resolving disputes between sovereign nations. Critics, however, interpret the move as evidence of a foreign policy that increasingly appears reactive rather than assertive. Both perspectives deserve thoughtful consideration. Diplomacy has always been the first instrument of responsible statecraft. Civilized nations resolve disagreements through dialogue, negotiation, and established international institutions before considering stronger measures. In this regard, approaching the African Union cannot reasonably be dismissed as weakness. The AU was created precisely to promote peace, cooperation, mediation, and conflict resolution among African states. Yet diplomacy produces result only when it is backed by credibility and the clear capacity to defend national interests. When diplomatic engagement is not accompanied by visible resolve, it risks being interpreted—not only by adversaries but even by allies as hesitation. This perception lies at the heart of the current debate surrounding Nigeria's response.

Nigeria's position in Africa was not earned by population figures alone. For decades, the country built an international reputation through principled leadership and tangible sacrifice. During Africa's liberation struggles, Nigeria became one of the continent's strongest supporters of anti-colonial movements and the campaign against apartheid in South Africa. Successive Nigerian governments committed political influence, diplomatic support, financial resources, and moral leadership to liberation movements across Southern Africa. Nigerian citizens contributed through special levies, while the country's foreign policy consistently placed African freedom and self-determination at its centre. Although some monetary figures frequently cited regarding Nigeria's contributions remain difficult to verify with precision, historians broadly agree that Nigeria was among the most significant international supporters of the anti-apartheid struggle. That legacy earned Nigeria enormous respect across Africa and beyond. Ironically, many Nigerians now wonder whether that moral authority has gradually diminished. The concern is not that Nigeria should abandon diplomacy. Rather, it is whether the country's diplomacy still carries sufficient weight to deter repeated attacks on its citizens. Calls for stronger action should not be misunderstood as demands for retaliation or reckless confrontation. Modern diplomacy offers numerous



legitimate instruments through which governments protect their nationals while preserving peaceful relations. Whenever Nigerians become victims of organized violence abroad, the Federal Government has both a constitutional obligation and a moral responsibility to demonstrate that their safety remains a national priority.

Such measures may include: Summoning the offending country's High Commissioner or Ambassador for formal explanations. Issuing official diplomatic protests backed by clear timelines for action. Demanding credible security guarantees for Nigerian citizens and businesses. Recalling Nigeria's ambassador for consultations where circumstances warrant. Pursuing accountability through bilateral agreements, regional organizations, and international legal mechanisms. Reviewing aspects of bilateral cooperation where necessary to reinforce diplomatic seriousness. These are not extraordinary actions. They are internationally recognized diplomatic

tools routinely employed by sovereign nations seeking to defend their citizens and national interests. The effectiveness of diplomacy is measured not merely by polite conversations but by the willingness of states to defend legitimate interests through lawful and credible means. The repeated recurrence of xenophobic violence also presents a profound challenge to the African Union itself. Continental integration cannot thrive if Africans remain unsafe in fellow African countries. The AU's vision is built upon principles of unity, cooperation, free movement, and shared prosperity. These ideals lose credibility whenever foreign nationals become easy targets during periods of domestic political or economic tension. While the African Union has repeatedly condemned xenophobic violence, stronger institutional action is increasingly necessary. Member states should be held accountable for fulfilling their obligations under regional human rights frameworks and international law. Beyond issuing communiqués, the AU should strengthen early-warning mechanisms, support independent investigations where necessary, facilitate mediation, and encourage practical measures that protect lawful residents regardless of nationality. A continent seeking deeper integration cannot afford recurring cycles of violence against fellow Africans.

South Africa occupies a unique place in Africa's political history. Its democratic transition remains one of the continent's greatest achievements, made possible in part through the solidarity and sacrifices of many African countries—including Nigeria. That history places a special responsibility upon South Africa's democratic institutions. Economic hardship, unemployment, inequality, and political frustrations undoubtedly create serious domestic pressures. However, these challenges cannot justify violence against innocent migrants whose only offence is seeking lawful livelihoods. Foreign nationals should never become convenient scapegoats for structural economic problems or political dissatisfaction. Every xenophobic attack undermines South Africa's constitutional values, weakens its international reputation, and damages the spirit of Pan-African solidarity upon which regional cooperation depends. Protecting every lawful resident is not merely an international obligation; it is a constitutional and moral imperative.