

Despite state denial, xenophobia is highly destructive force in SA

JONATHAN CRUSH

VIOLENT xenophobia has become a regular feature of South African life.

The City of Johannesburg's removal of more than 2 000 informal traders last year in Operation Clean Sweep was only the latest in a series of actions with striking parallels to citizen violence against migrants.

The police regularly engage in high-profile but ultimately ineffectual campaigns to purge cities of migrants. The public not only backs this, but seeks to imitate them when they fail, as they usually do.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that 62 migrants were murdered in South Africa during the first half of 2013 and, in the same period, about 130 separate attacks on foreigners were reported.

This left 73 people seriously wounded and resulted in the displacement of up to 5 000.

In an address to commemorate the victims of the 2006 xenophobic attacks, then president Thabo Mbeki

said he had never met a xenophobic South African.

His argument that attacks on migrants are acts of criminality, not xenophobia, has long outlived his own political life and remains the official position of the government.

In June, for example, following an upsurge of attacks on Somali shop-owners, the Minister of International Relations and Co-operation, Maite Nkomo-Mashabane, announced that "the looting, displacement and killing of foreigners should not be viewed as xenophobic attacks, but as opportunistic criminal acts".

The cabinet issued a statement that the violence should not be labelled xenophobia and called on communities to be vigilant against "the possible resurgence of criminal violence against foreign nationals".

Despite the xenophobia denialism, these brutal attacks on migrants are just one more, albeit extreme, manifestation of xenophobia – it really is as simple as

that. Certainly the actions of the perpetrators are crimes under South African law, but that is not the same thing as saying that the rationale for these attacks was criminality rather than xenophobia, as if the two are not intimately connected.

For others, xenophobia certainly exists but is seen as superficial and insufficient to explain the ferocity of attacks on migrants and refugees.

These xenophobia minimalists argue that it is grinding poverty, inequality and fierce competition for resources in the impoverished informal settlements that inevitably leads to victimisation of the most vulnerable.

But xenophobia denialism and xenophobia minimalism ignore the evidence that most South Africans hold extremely negative views about migrants and refugees and want the state to exercise greater coercive powers to get rid of them.

These views are suffused with a powerful set of myths about migrants and their supposed threat

to the interests of citizens.

Asked to explain the reasons for the nationwide violence against migrants in May 2006, nearly two-thirds of respondents (64 percent) blamed migrants for crime.

Other leading explanations were that migrants take jobs from South Africans (62 percent), that they are "culturally different" (60 percent), that they "cheat" South Africans (56 percent), that they use health services for free (55 percent), that they "take RDP houses" (52 percent) and that they "steal" South African women (52 percent).

The Southern African Migration Programme (SAMP) has recently developed a xenophobia index (the SXI) which measures the levels of intolerance displayed by South Africans.

A nationwide 2010 survey found that the highest SXI scores were among South African Indians, Africans-speakers and the uneducated. The survey also found that the SXI increased with

increasing household income. In other words, contrary to expectations, the poorest are actually the least xenophobic. The SXI declines the more interaction a person has with foreigners.

In South Africa, xenophobia includes contempt for certain kinds of migrants, especially those from other African countries. Migrants from some African countries with common ethnic and cultural characteristics to some South Africans (such as Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland) are tolerated to a certain extent.

Migrants from most other countries are loathed by the majority of South Africans, with particular opprobrium reserved for those from Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Somalia.

SAMP's survey also found a hard core more than willing to put their attitudes into action. Twenty-seven percent said they were likely to take part in actions to prevent migrants from moving into their

neighbourhood or operating a business there. Fifteen percent would gang up to force a migrant to leave the community and 9 percent would resort to violence to do so.

With this level of willingness to take violent action against migrants and refugees, it is not surprising that attacks have continued throughout the country since 2008 and are certainly not confined to those hot spots that exploded in an orgy of violence back then.

Given the upsurge in attacks on migrant and refugee businesses in the last five years, the willingness of a significant minority of South Africans to prevent them operating is alarming.

Failure to protect migrants' lives and property by police and other government personnel during attacks inevitably marks them out as soft targets, worsening their vulnerability to such aggression.

The prosecution of perpetrators is non-existent or inadequate, leading to a culture of impunity

Why disown the existence of xenophobia for which there is abundant quantitative and qualitative research evidence?

Perhaps it makes South Africa look better to the rest of Africa, especially with a South African now chairwoman of the African Union?

Or perhaps it allows the blame for violence to be externalised to shadowy anti-social criminal elements and not seen as a systemic problem within the state itself and within civil society?

Whatever the explanation, it certainly illustrates a continuing lack of political will to own the problem and act against one of the most destructive and anti-democratic forces in post-apartheid South Africa.

● *Crush is honorary professor at UCT and will speak at a February 10-11 conference on Urban Informality and Migrant Entrepreneurship in Southern African Cities, at UCT's Graduate School of Business.*