



PRESS STATEMENT

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GOVERNMENT, ANC SHOULD MAKE WORDS MATTER TO COMBAT XENOPHOBIA

The Centre for Human Rights is appalled and deeply concerned not only about the recent recurrence of xenophobic violence, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal, but also by its persistence, and its widespread nature and severity.

These incidents take place against the background of highly publicized utterances inflaming animosity, stoking the fires of hatred towards non-South Africans from Africa who find themselves in South Africa.

In response, the Presidency issued a statement. As too often, however, it smacks of formalism and did little to change the public discourse. For the most part, the voice of the government and the ANC has remained mute on this issue. On a number of occasions, statements from these quarters have even contributed to a climate of hostility towards non-nationals.

It seems important to us that President Zuma, government ministers, and the ANC leadership unequivocally distance themselves from all statements that foment xenophobic violence. “We need to hear language that makes a difference, words that loudly and clearly counter the toxic discourse that has been allowed to take us down a spiral of violence”, said Prof Frans Viljoen, Director of the Centre.

The Centre therefore calls on the government and ANC to effectively engage the broadest possible South African public on this issue, in order to curb and eradicate xenophobia and xenophobic violence. These messages should be repeated, constantly reiterated and not only heard after crises moments. These messages should be accessible, be in local languages, and should be expressed directly to communities, in conjunction with local leaders. Our people need to be



reminded that we too are Africans; we should be reminded of the spirit of Ubuntu that emphasizes our common humanity; and we should be reminded of the role of other African countries in the support of the struggle against apartheid.

Words are not enough, but they matter. A clear unambiguous acknowledgment by the government and the ANC that xenophobia exists, is wrong, and needs to be halted and curbed is a good starting point.

Such acknowledgment must then be backed up by action. On the short term, visible accountability through the judicial processes of (at the very least) those responsible for violent crimes must be ensured. On the longer term, continuous sensitization, education and public dialogue, also involving non-South Africans, should be embarked upon. People should, for example, be made to understand why so many Somali's flee their country, why they are eligible for refugee status, and what the legal status of an asylum seeker is.

Research and reflection, within government, political parties, and the broader society including academic institutions, should be undertaken, with a view to developing a comprehensive action plan to identify and address the root causes of this phenomenon.

Silence or a muted response by those whose voices matter in our society will contribute to further blind us to the disastrous effects of xenophobia and xenophobic violence in South Africa. We need brave and visionary leadership on this issue.

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