

“There is only one human race”: The militant Durban shack dwellers’ movement Abahlali base Mjondolo responds to the xenophobic attacks in Johannesburg

Thursday 12 June 2008, by [Abahlali](#) (Date first published: 21 May 2008).

Our struggle and every real struggle is to put the human being at the centre of society, starting with the worst off.

An action can be illegal. A person cannot be illegal. A person is a person where ever they may find themselves.

If you live in a settlement you are from that settlement and you are a neighbour and a comrade in that settlement.

We condemn the attacks, the beatings, rape and murder, in Johannesburg on people born in other countries. We will fight left and right to ensure that this does not happen here in KwaZulu-Natal.

We have been warning for years that the anger of the poor can go in many directions. That warning, like our warnings about the rats and the fires and the lack of toilets, the human dumping grounds called relocation sites, the new concentration camps called transit camps and corrupt, cruel, violent and racist police, has gone unheeded.

Let us be clear. Neither poverty nor oppression justify one poor person turning on another. A poor man who turns on his wife or a poor family that turn on their neighbours must be opposed, stopped and brought to justice. But the reason why this happens in Alex and not Sandton is because people in Alex are suffering and scared for the future of their lives. They are living under the kind of stress that can damage a person. The perpetrators of these attacks must be held responsible but the people who have crowded the poor onto tiny bits of land, threatened their hold on that land with evictions and forced removals, treated them all like criminals, exploited them, repressed their struggles, pushed up the price of food and built too few houses, that are too small and too far away and then corruptly sold them must also be held responsible.

There are other truths that also need to be faced up to.

We need to be clear that the Department of Home Affairs does not treat refugees or migrants as human beings. Our members who were born in other countries tell us terrible stories about very long queues that lead only to more queues and then to disrespect, cruelty and corruption. They tell us terrible stories about police who demand bribes, tear up their papers, steal their money and send them to Lindela – a place that is even worse than a transit camp. A place that is not fit for a human being. We know that you can even be sent to Lindela if you were born in South Africa but you look ‘too dark’ to the police or you come from Giyani and so you don’t know the word for elbow in isiZulu.

We need to be clear that in every relocation all the people without ID books are left homeless. This

affects some people born in South Africa but it mostly affects people born in other countries.

We need to be clear that many politicians, and the police and the media, talk about 'illegal immigrants' as if they are all criminals. We know the damage that this does and the pain that this causes. We are also spoken about as if we are all criminals when in fact we suffer the most from crime because we have no gates or guards to protect our homes.

We need to be clear about the role of the South African government and South African companies in other countries. We need to be clear about NEPAD. We all know what Anglo-American is doing in the Congo and what our government is doing in Zimbabwe. They must also be held responsible.

We all know that South Africans were welcomed in Zimbabwe and in Zambia, even as far away as England, when they were fleeing the oppression of apartheid. In our own movement we have people who were in exile. We must welcome those who are fleeing oppression now. This obligation is doubled by the fact that our government and big companies here are supporting oppression in other countries.

People say that people born in other countries are selling mandrax. Oppose mandrax and its sellers but don't lie to yourself and say that people born in South Africa do not also sell mandrax or that our police do not take money from mandrax sellers. Fight for a police service that serves the people. Don't turn your suffering neighbours into enemies.

People say that people born in other countries are amagundane (rats, meaning scabs). Oppose amagundane but don't lie to yourself and say that people born in South Africa are not also amagundane. People also say that people born in other countries are willing to work for very little money bringing everyone's wages down. But we know that people are desperate and struggling to survive everywhere. Fight for strong unions that cover all sectors, even informal work. Don't turn your suffering neighbours into enemies.

People say that people born in other countries don't stand up to struggle and always run away from the police. Oppose cowardice but don't lie to yourself and say that people born in South Africa are not also cowards. Don't lie to yourself and pretend that it is the same for someone born here and someone not born here to stand up to the corrupt, violent and racist police. Fight for ID books for your neighbours so that we can all stand together for the rights of the poor. Don't turn your suffering neighbours into enemies.

People say that people born in other countries are getting houses by corruption. Oppose corruption but don't lie to yourself and say that people born in South Africa are not also buying houses from the councillors and officials in the housing department. Fight against corruption. Don't turn your suffering neighbours into enemies.

People say that people born in other countries are more successful in love because they don't have to send money home to rural areas. Oppose a poverty so bad that it even strangles love. Live for a life outside of money by fighting for an income for everyone. Don't turn your suffering neighbours into enemies.

People say that there are too many sellers on the streets and that the ones from outside must go. We need to ask ourselves why only a few companies can own so many big shops, why the police harass and steal from street traders and why the traders are being driven out of the cities. The poor man cutting hair and the poor woman selling fruit are not our enemies. Don't turn your suffering neighbours into enemies.

We all know that if this thing is not stopped a war against the Mozambicans will become a war

against all the amaShangaan. A war against the Zimbabweans will become a war against the amaShona that will become a war against the amaVenda. Then people will be asking why the amaXhosa are in Durban, why the Chinese and Pakistanis are here. If this thing is not stopped what will happen to a place like Clare Estate where the people are amaXhosa, amaMpondo, amaZulu and abeSuthu; Indian and African; Muslim, Hindu and Christian; born in South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawai, Pakistan, Namibia, the Congo and India.

Yesterday we heard that this thing started in Warwick and in the City centre. We heard that traders had their goods stolen and that people were being checked for their complexion, a man from Ntuzuma was stopped and for being 'too black'. Tensions are high in the City centre. Last night people were running in the streets in Umbilo looking for 'amakwerkwere'. People in the tall flats were shouting down to them saying 'There are Congeese here, come up!' This thing has started in Durban. We don't know what will happen tonight.

We will do everything that we can to make sure that it goes no further. We have already decided on the following actions:

1. We will resuscitate our relations with the street traders' organisations and meet to discuss this thing with them and stay in daily contact with them.
2. We have made contact with refugee organisations and will stay in day to day contact with them. We will invite them to all our meetings and events.
3. We have made contact with senior police officers who we can trust, who are not corrupt and who wish to serve the people. They have given us their cell numbers and have promised to work with us to stop this immediately if it starts in Durban. We will ask all our people to watch for this thing and if it happens we'll be able to contact the police that we can trust immediately. They have promised to come straight away.
4. We will put this threat on the agenda of all of our meetings and events.
5. We will discuss this in every branch and in every settlement in our movement.
6. We will discuss this with our allied movements like the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and the Landless People's Movement so that we can develop a national strategy.
7. In the coming days our members are travelling to the Northern Cape, the North West, Johannesburg and Cape Town to meet shack dwellers struggling against forced removal, corruption and lack of services. In each of these meetings we will discuss this issue.
8. We are asking all radio stations to make space for us and others to discuss this issue.
9. In the past we have not put our members born in other countries to the front because we were scared that the police would send them to Lindela. From now on we will put our members born in other countries in the front, but not with their full names because we still cannot trust all the police.
10. If the need arises here we will ask all our members to defend and shelter their comrades from other countries.

We hear that the political analysts are saying that the poor must be educated about xenophobia. Always the solution is to 'educate the poor'. When we get cholera we must be educated about washing our hands when in fact we need clear water. When we get burnt we must be educated about fire when in fact we need electricity. This is just a way of blaming the poor for our suffering. We want land and housing in the cities, we want to go to university, we want water and electricity – we don't want to be educated to be good at surviving poverty on our own. The solution is not to

educate the poor about xenophobia. The solution is to give the poor what they need to survive so that it becomes easier to be welcoming and generous. The solution is to stop the xenophobia at all levels of our society. Arrest the poor man who has become a murderer. But also arrest the corrupt policeman and the corrupt officials in Home Affairs. Close down Lindela and apologise for the suffering it has caused. Give papers to all the people sheltering in the police stations in Johannesburg.

It is time to ask serious questions about why it is that money and rich people can move freely around the world while everywhere the poor must confront razor wire, corrupt and violent police, queues and relocation or deportation. In South Africa some of us are moved out of the cities to rural human dumping grounds called relocation sites while others are moved all the way out of the country. Some of us are taken to transit camps and some of us are taken to Lindela. The destinations might be different but it is the same kind of oppression. Let us all educate ourselves on these questions so that we can all take action.

We want, with humility, to suggest that the people in Jo'burg move beyond making statements condemning these attacks. We suggest, with humility, that now that we are in this terrible crisis we need a living solidarity, a solidarity in action. It is time for each community and family to take in the refugees from this violence. They cannot be left in the police stations where they risk deportation. It is time for the church leaders and the political leaders and the trade union leaders to be with and live with the comrades born in other countries every day until this danger passes. Here in Durban our comrades to stand with us when the Land Invasions Unit comes to evict us or the police come to beat us. Even the priests are beaten. Now we must all stand with our comrades when their neighbours come to attack them. If this happens in the settlements here in Durban this is what we must do and what we will do.

We make the following demands to the government of South Africa:

1. Close down Lindela today. Set the people free.
2. Announce, today, that there will be papers for every person sheltering in your police stations.
3. Ban the sale of land in the cities until all the people are housed.
4. Stop all evictions and forced removals immediately.
5. Do not build one more golf course estate until everyone has a house.
6. Support the people of Zimbabwe, not an oppressive government that destroys the homes of the poor and uses rape and torture to control opposition.
7. Arrest all corrupt people working in the police and Home Affairs.
8. Announce, today, a summit between all refugee organisations and the police and Home Affairs to plan how they can be changed radically so that they begin to serve all the people living in South Africa.

For further information or comment please contact:

S'bu Zikode: 0835470474

Zodwa Nsibande: 0828302707

Mnikelo Ndabankulu: 0797450653

Mashumi Figlan: 0795843995