

**State Response and Resilience to Xenophobic
Attack on Nigerians in South Africa:
A Discourse**

By
Edun, Abdulkareem Jimoh*
&
Otumala, Simon Jonah**

Abstract

In the recent time, Nigerians in South Africa have witnessed renewed attack from their South Africa counterparts due to struggle for limited social and economic resources in the country. Xenophobic attack was not new, it stated in 2008 and reoccurred in 2015 though with minor attention

* Dr. Edun, Abdulkareem Jimoh is with the Department of Political Science at the University of Ilorin, Ilorin.

** Otumala, Simon Jonah is with the Department of Political Science at Federal College of Education, Abeokuta.a

from Nigerian Government. However, the recent attack on Nigerians in South Africa is only debilitating but also endemic thus draw reaction from both the local populace and Nigeria Government. This paper therefore, discusses the Nigeria's government responses to xenophobic attack on Nigerians in South Africa and her capability to curtail future attack on Nigerians by South Africa. The paper adopts relative deprivation theory, a theory that situates violent struggle on economic resources on the deprivation or lack of access to the resources by a party to the crisis. Data were sourced from available literature on the topic and analyzed qualitatively. Findings reveal that Nigeria Government diplomatic responses to the attack were of international standard but the Government needs to among others, improve her economic fortunes in order to improve her citizens international recognition and respond to such crisis appropriately.

Keywords: Xenophobia, Diplomatic, Deprivation. Survival, Development

Introduction

Xenophobia has remained a major issue in the discourse of Nigeria-South Africa relations since the major attacks on African migrants in poor neighbourhoods in Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg in 2008, 2015 and 2019. The various reactions that have over the years accompanied these attacks have raised

fundamental questions especially on the hegemonic contest between Nigeria and South Africa on one hand, and strained bilateral relations between the two countries on the other side due to absent of regular diplomatic contacts.

The state of Africa's economic and gross under-development with a very large improvised population seeking refuge outside the African continent and further worsened by a good number of African perishing on the Atlantic Ocean on a daily basis has compounded the many problems confronting the continent. Africans, because of poor state of development have resolve to seeking abode within the continent as seen in a good numbers of African national from other countries staying in South Africa, thereby increasing the already stretched South African economy.

The mass exodus of Africans and mostly Nigerians to other countries within and outside the continent has raised concerns especially when considered within the context of the various in-human actions that are melted on immigrants from within Africa. For example, forced slavery and human right abuse in Libya against Nigerians and also the most recent and recurring Xenophobic attacked against Africans and specifically against Nigerians in South Africa raises fundamental concerns.

Xenophobic attack or Xenophobia is the gross maltreatment and negative attitudes of South Africans who felt deprived of their resources thus resulted into attack of African national in their country. Xenophobic attacks are a regular occurrence in South Africa, with 7 deaths in 2015 and 62 deaths in 2008. It takes the form of organised violence, molestation and criminality against blacks in South Africa. These negative acts are embedded in daily economic and social situation of labour migrant and refugees in South Africa largely owing to the prevalent economic crisis and inequality prevalent in the country.

Within the different and contending description of xenophobia,

the attack is underscored as a violation of human dignity and human rights in keeping with Article 26 of 1998 of the United Nations which declares racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia as human rights violations². As a social and violent manifestation of Africans against Africans, numerous studies have established that xenophobia is institutionalised in many sectors of South African society, including government, media and financial houses³.

These violent attacks therefore with it renewed vigour as experienced in the South African city of Johannesburg from 1 September - 5 September 2019, leading to the deaths of at least seven people raised fundamental questions on the continued existence of a united continent and the imperative of a safe migrant within the workings of the African thesis of brotherhood. The immediate and long-term occurrence and reoccurrence of these attacks in South Africa therefore calls for the analysis of state response especially from both sides of the divide (South Africa and government of victims of xenophobic attacks).

Statement of Problem

The continued organised attacks against African national in South Africa negates the African spirit of unity, negritude and pan-Africanism which led to the organised struggle and concerted efforts which rescued South Africa from the grip of apartheid, where internal mechanism was deployed to relegate black South Africans by the minority white settlers. African countries and most especially Nigeria were described as frontline states because of their contributions both financial and otherwise that ensured the complete emancipation of the people of South Africa.

Despite the above assertion, the people of South Africa have under the guise of criminality and violence subject immigrants in their country to all manner of ill-treatment called xenophobic attack

without considering the collective spirit of unity that is expected to be a distinguishing character of Africans across the continent.

In addressing the above, African leaders and respective states have responded to the most recent attacks against African by boycotting the recent concluded World Economic Forum (WEF) hosted by South Africa and in another response, earlier scheduled football match between the Bafana Bafana of South Africa and Zambia, Madagascar was called-off because of attacks and safety concerns of Africans. Given this actions by African states, this paper examines the immediate response of the Africa government in general on the Xenophobic attack and specifically on Nigerians especially from the economic point of view with the primary objective of situating government responsibility in addressing underdevelopment and its concomitant effects on the people which is the driving forces for migration to South Africa.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts relative deprivation theory to analyse the issues which surround xenophobic attack in South Africa. Relative Deprivation theory was used by Robert Melton, an American sociologist who first used it to study America soldiers' reaction during the First World War. The Theory suggests that people who feel they are being deprived of almost anything considered essential in their society—whether money, rights, political voice or status—will organize or join social movements dedicated to obtaining the things of which they feel deprived. For example, relative deprivation has been cited as one of the causes of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the struggle of Blacks to gain social and legal equality with whites. The xenophobic attack was principally as result of inability of South Africans to have access to their country resources such as employment opportunities which resulted into incidents of social disorder like rioting, looting and terrorism.

Xenophobic attacks and their associated disorderly acts can often be attributed to the grievances of South Africans who feel they are being denied resources to which they are entitled. Therefore, this perceived deprivation has raised fundamental issues in the assessment of the response of State and non-state Actors in proffering lasting solution to the attacks.

Chronicling Nigeria Responses to Xenophobic Attack

Since the inception of xenophobic attack on non-nationals of South Africa and most particularly Nigerians, the government of Nigeria has taken steps aimed at addressing the perennial attacks which has affected Nigeria-South Africa relations. Deepening diplomatic relations between Nigeria and South Africa requires a level playing ground where citizens of respective countries will be critical to the actualization of the content of every relation.

The Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) confirmed South Africa as one of the most xenophobic countries in the world⁴. However, the conduct of international relations always carry with it reactions from recipient countries especially against hostile actions melted on citizens or representatives. These actions are always conducted under the rubrics of reciprocity, weather for good or otherwise. In this case, Nigerian national and other Africans been victim of xenophobic attacks has come under severe maltreatment and therefore, respective government have reciprocated these actions in defence of the rights and dignity of their citizens.

Governments or their representative reacts to issues in the international system in multiple folds as seen in the course of the recurring xenophobic attacks. Nigeria government reaction to the recent attack was accompanied by the tougher stance in the face of the new wave of the violence that struck South Africa. The country toed the part of other affected African counties to boycott the World Economic Forum, which was hosted in Cape Town.

According to the African Report⁵, “The Nigerian government announced that it wanted to take “decisive measures” against South Africa, where attacks and looting of businesses, targeted against foreigners, have spread like wildfire across the country and have killed seven people since the beginning of the week”.

In related twist celebrities across Nigeria, has also lead their voices in solidarity with the Nigerian government in boycotting earlier scheduled events slated to hold in South Africa. Notably, according to Burna Boy who had been a victim of anti-Interian racism in South Africa in 2017 and since then has not set foot in the country. In a related development, the Nigeria government also took to warning its South African counterpart on the implication of xenophobic attack on its citizen’s resident in the country. According to AbdurRahman⁶, “the Nigerian government says it will take further steps to ensure safety and protection of its citizens in South Africa. The position comes in the wake of a round of xenophobic attacks that hit Johannesburg on Monday. The government described the incidents as unacceptable adding: ‘Enough is enough. Nigeria will take definitive measures to ensure safety and protection of her citizens”.

According to the *Conversation Newspaper* “the latest xenophobic attacks in South Africa have ignited the long-standing tensions between the country and Nigeria⁷. These are captured in the retaliatory attacks on South African businesses in Nigeria and the diplomatic outrage by Nigerian authorities. More critical was the temporary closure of South African missions in Abuja and Lagos and Nigeria’s decision to recall its ambassador”.

As temporary diplomatic reaction, Nigeria government evacuated willing Nigerians from South Africa with the support of the CEO of Air Peace, Allen Onyema. The legislative arm of the Nigerian government called the government of South Africa to provide compensation to the victims of the attack.

In pursuing a peaceful and coordinated response to the dwindling fortune of Nigeria-South Africa relations because the recurring attacks in South Africa, the President of Nigeria, Mohammed Buhari made a three-day working visit to South Africa to meet the President of the Country Cyril Ramaphosa. The visit was meant to address issues that borders on Nigeria-South Africa relations given the position of the duo in the continent. The meeting critically accessed the economic, political and social issues affecting the African continent and the role the two can play at driving an inclusive development agenda that will improve the living condition of their citizens and Africa at large⁸.

At the meeting, amid warm smiles and a joint commitment to strengthen bilateral relations, Buhari said the attacks were “unacceptable” and called for preventive measures. “We call for the strengthening and implementation of all the necessary measures to prevent the reoccurrence of such actions,” he said. On the other hand Ramaphosa states that “Early warning mechanisms will be set up so that when we see there is restiveness in both of our people ... we will be able to inform one another.” He added: “We are equally committed to upholding the rule of law and ensuring that all those involved in criminal activities, regardless of their nationality⁹.

Nigeria’s Capability to Curtail the Xenophobic Trend in South Africa

The rising spate of insecurity and intolerance of foreign nationals in South Africa is largely attributed to the challenge of lack of employment first for local South Africans and by implication the large number of foreign nationals. Also, underdevelopment and the politics of exclusion caused by institutionalized corruption have led many Africans and most importantly Nigerians to seek greener pasture outside of their country.

South Africans especially Nigerians requires holistic and coordinated action from government and its agent especially within the practicability of workable economic policies and actions that will translate to the wellbeing of the masses. It is not clear if Nigeria government is ready to utilise the availability of the abundant resources both in human and natural, to transform the country into a relatively industrialized nation in order to avert the reoccurrence of this nature of attack not only in South Africa but also elsewhere in the world.

The resilience of the country to manage the attack will depend largely on the economic transformation of the African continent and also the respective national leaders that will reduce poverty level, provide employment opportunities for the teeming masses, and also improvement and sustainability of bi-national relations that will be anchored on economic and political development of the countries relating together.

The resilience of the two to address the recurring attack and put a final stop to it is hinged on not just boasting economic ties but such must be reflected on the fortunes of the continent, especially given the place of Nigeria and South Africa in the continent. In the respect, as a fall-out of Buhari's visit to Ramaphosa, Cummings added, through unity comes strength. The two nations have the largest economies on the African continent and are seeking to boost inter-African trade and cooperation as a way to boost the continent's economy and lessen its dependency on the international community¹⁰.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper is an analysis of the nature of Nigeria-South Africa relations within the realities of xenophobic attack on Africans resident in South Africa. It was discovered that, economic issues and deprivations especially of the basic amenities required by the

citizens have breed this continued attacks especially against Nigerians in the country. Amongst other things, the paper addressed the various steps taken by states in Africa and specifically, the role of Nigerian and South African government aimed at addressing economic, political and social issues that have bearing on the lives of their citizens.

Given the forgoing position, the paper recommends the following;

- 1) The government of Nigeria needs to address the rising number of its citizens seeking escape out of the country through any means available because of economic, political and systemic exclusion. The formulation and implementation of people-centred policies that will help build a rich and comfortable populations beyond the giving of stipends all in the name of social programs should be critically addressed.
- 2) The continent of Africa through Africa Union should realistically address the growing crisis in the continent which is manifestations of economic and political crisis affecting the people. The continent owe citizens of member-state a duty to address economic inequality and docile political class who has for decades hold the progress the continent back. This will critically address the isolation theory which locates South Africa as an isolated state especially after its post-apartheid experience.
- 3) The government of Nigeria and South Africa should go beyond talk-shows to addressing the lingering suspicion between their citizens which has negatively affect residents in South Africa and also affecting establishment/corporations in Nigeria as seen in the recent vandalization of MTN and Shoprite by economic-deprived youths.
- 4) The place of New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) should be reassessed within the realities of events

between the two countries. The organisation is expected to take-up the task of addressing underdevelopment between Nigeria and South Africa which falls within its mandate, as development will strategically overcome all forms of economic issues fuelling xenophobic attack and every other violence.

Endnotes

1. Dr. Edun, Abdulkareem Jimoh is with the Department of Political Science at the University of Ilorin, Ilorin; Otumala, Simon Jonah is with the Department of Political Science at Federal College of Education, Abeokuta
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