

Declaration of the Coalition against Xenophobia

On the 11th of May, just as the first chill of winter settled on the Highveld to combine with rising food prices in reminding the poor of the passing of yet another year in search of the elusive 'better life for all', a community meeting in Alex would burst into a pogrom that swept across the country.

Whether fuelled by the anger and frustrations of a life lived on the margin, or driven by more sinister intent, there was little doubt that at the centre of the violence was a xenophobia that stretches from the most intimate space in the home to the hallowed halls of the state. In the more than two weeks that it took for the violence to begin to wane, we saw neighbour rise up in rage against neighbour in the name of a sacred 'South Africaness' and an 'authentic national subject' moving to protect his 'rightful place in the world'. Thousands were beaten and made to leave their homes, for many the only ones they knew. Whether in the streets of our neighbourhoods or through the vicarious gaze of the media we saw the most horrific cruelty and callous treatment of one life by another, made all the more gruesome for the moral high ground assumed by the perpetrators. The photos of the tragic death of Ernesto Nhamuave, set ablaze for no crime other than something so arbitrary as nationality, would become inscribed in the minds of all who wondered, how can this be possible? Yet these images and the thousands of stories so far collected give us but a fragment of the atrocity that began with the pogrom in Alex, and continues today as the victims of the wave of xenophobic violence are collected into camps and made to hold on to the ambiguous promise of reintegration, or simply given no choice but to leave with their lives. Today, tens of thousands have been displaced. Thousands are being shuffled between camps across the country, and still more have fled for fear of what it would risk to stay. More than 60 are now dead. (June 2008)

As we set out together in our common mission to build a network to defend migrants, - as but a reflection of ourselves - against all forms of xenophobia, we begin by recalling the bitter irony that it is the pogrom that awoke us to the deep prejudices that have for long been dangerously bubbling in our midst.

Whether in the random acts of everyday violence against those made vulnerable for having been abandoned by the law, or in the institutionalised stigmatisation and violent policing of those deemed 'illegal', the force of a common prejudice becomes clear. It is the same prejudice we see in the SAPS's raids through places like Hillbrow, in the tabloid headlines crafted to incite, in the brutality of border farmers who round up Zimbabweans as if they are nothing more than livestock, in the statements of government officials who blame their delivery failures on the influx of "foreigners" from across the Limpopo, or even the bosses for whom the term 'illegal' simply means cheaper, docile labour. It is this prejudice we find distilled in the moment of the pogrom and that we come together in the Coalition Against Xenophobia to fight.

As we search for common solutions, we confront a state hardened by prejudice and denialism. Standing in the eye of the storm, the state would respond to the crises with force, doing little more than to quell the violence by deepening the criminalisation of the poor communities. As a state of emergency seemed to descend over areas touched by the pogroms, the state moved to shift its victims into camps, equipped with nothing

but the most basic amenities for bare life. The pogrom and its aftermath revealed real cracks in our fragile new democracy, only to become a political card to be traded in service of internecine factionalisms and long standing national political rivalries that did little to underline the urgency of attending to the present crisis.

But in the mirror that was held up by the pogrom, we caught a frightening profile of ourselves; a self consumed by insecurity and fear for the future, a self that would lash out in violence at the faintest image of the unfamiliar or unknown, and a self that would make its stand on the ground of narrow chauvinisms, political cowardice, or simply opportunism. But in its ebb, another figure would also begin to appear, to struggle for dominion in this, a battle to give character to the face just beginning to appear. As the pogrom confused South African for non-South African we discovered a common humanity that transcended any principle of nationality. As we looked into the faces of those forced to flee their homes, forced into camps and a life of insecurity, we recalled past struggles and refugees and those that had once given us refuge and security. And as we recognise the vulnerability of those forced to live with the mark of 'illegality' we see nothing but our own unclosed struggle to be free...a struggle that knows no borders.

This is the image of a self we would rather be. Drawn together by a common opposition to xenophobia, we set out together to make a space for such a self to truly be.

As a coalition of organisations and individuals brought together in this moment of crisis, we undertake a common mission to build a network to defend migrants against all forms of xenophobia. Affirming the principle of a diversity of tactics for constituent members in the fight against xenophobia, we commit ourselves to collectively deepening our understanding of a politics of migration, and the articulation of a process to creatively and democratically discover common solutions.

No one is illegal.

