

AFRICA

Antiforeigner Attacks Strain Ties Among African Countries

Xenophobic attacks in South Africa trigger backlash in Nigeria and other African countries



Nigerian entrepreneur Basil Onibo, a victim of the latest spate of xenophobic attacks in Johannesburg, examining the burnt-out cars at his dealership on Thursday. PHOTO: SIPHIWE SIBEKO/REUTERS

By Alexandra Wexler

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JOHANNESBURG—A spate of attacks in South Africa this week against foreigners from other African nations has highlighted the failures of governments continentwide to tackle deep inequalities and crippling poverty, observers say.

Since Sunday, nearly 450 people have been arrested in South Africa for violent offenses related to xenophobic attacks, and at least 10 people have been killed, including two foreigners, according to South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. The violence has been concentrated in Johannesburg and nearby Pretoria.

On Tuesday “locals threw petrol bombs at my shop, took everything I had on the shelves, and burned it,” said Mohamed Warsame, 30, a Somalia-born shopkeeper in Johannesburg who came to South Africa in 2014 to escape violence in his home country. “I have absolutely nothing now.”



A man lying on the ground after being arrested by police in Johannesburg on Thursday during a wave of antifoignier violence.
PHOTO: GUILLEM SARTORIO/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The violence has prompted a backlash across the continent. Earlier this week, Tanzania suspended flights of its national carrier, Air Tanzania, to South Africa, and Zambia canceled a weekend soccer match against South Africa. In Lubumbashi, the Democratic Republic of Congo's second-biggest city, protesters pelted the South African Consulate with rocks.

Nigerian Vice President Yemi Osinbajo, who was meant to attend the World Economic Forum of Africa this week in Cape Town, pulled out of the conference, with senior government officials saying Nigeria was boycotting the gathering of business and political leaders in response to the xenophobic attacks. The country, Africa's most populous, also recalled its high commissioner, or main envoy, to South Africa.

The violence has stoked long-simmering tensions between sub-Saharan Africa's two biggest economies: Nigeria and South Africa. Both are regional powers vying for continental dominance, and both are also struggling with lackluster growth and unemployment over 20%.

"Because this tension between South Africa and Nigeria has been going on for so long, it really does touch a nerve for Nigerians," said Darias Jonker, Africa director at political-risk consulting firm Eurasia Group.

The cancellations at the World Economic Forum, a high-profile conference that attracts corporate and investment leaders, have dented South Africa's image just when the government is desperate to attract foreign tourists and investment.

Outside the forum, South African police used water cannons and stun grenades on protesters who had come to demonstrate against a separate spate of high-profile murders of women in South Africa.

“The promise that came with [the end of apartheid] was largely betrayed by the greed, corruption, and maladministration that now bring us to another brink,” Gary van Staden, an analyst with NKC African Economics, said in a note. “It is time for Mr. Ramaphosa to lead by making the decisions that are required to grow the economy and to address the root causes of the xenophobia.”

During a national address this week, Mr. Ramaphosa appealed to South Africans, recalling the solidarity his party, the African National Congress, enjoyed from other countries during South Africa’s fight against apartheid.

“The people from other countries on our continent stood with us in our struggle against apartheid,” Mr. Ramaphosa said. “We value our relations with other African countries and need to work to strengthen political, social and trade ties if we are to develop our economy and those of our neighbors.”

Mahat Salat, 41, a Somalia-born travel agent who has lived in South Africa for 20 years, says local police failed to respond when his shop was looted twice about a decade ago.

“It’s not right that South Africans do this,” Mr. Salat said. “They must not forget that in apartheid, during their struggle, it was other African people who helped them. We are all Africans, this shouldn’t be happening.”

In Nigeria, the local unit of South African telecom giant MTN Group Ltd. closed all of its stores and service centers earlier this week after attacks on its facilities in several cities in reprisal for the South African riots targeting foreign-owned businesses. In the Nigerian commercial capital of Lagos, rioters looted an outlet of South African discount retailer PEP.

Nigerian singer-songwriter Tiwa Savage announced she was canceling a scheduled performance in South Africa later this month, calling the attacks “SICK” in a tweet.

Disinformation has also inflamed tensions in South Africa and abroad, with old videos making the rounds on social media, including a particularly graphic one of a man, purportedly a foreigner, on fire. Other videos have been found not to have originated in South Africa, according to fact-checking groups.

Souring relationships with the rest of the continent could have dire long-term consequences for South Africa.

Over the past 10 years, the African continent accounted for an average of 44% of South Africa’s agricultural exports—worth about \$3.9 billion—up from an average of less than 30% in the prior decade, according to Wandile Sihlobo, chief economist at South Africa’s Agricultural Business Chamber.

“The growth that South Africa’s agricultural sector has enjoyed over the past few decades was largely export-driven, and the African continent has been a key market,” Mr. Sihlobo said. “So the recent xenophobic tension is not only bad socially, but could also complicate business relations.”

—*Nicholas Bariyo and Aaisha Dadi Patel contributed to this article.*

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