

XENOPHOBIA: SOUTH AFRICA'S SUCCESSOR TO APARTHEID

By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

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A child cries as she awaits hospital treatment at a temporary refugee camp set up for foreign nationals fleeing attacks from South Africans in Johannesburg, South Africa, Saturday, April 18, 2015. Mobs in South Africa attacked shops owned by immigrants in poor areas of the city overnight following similar violence in another part of the country that killed six people, according to media reports. (Source: AP Photo/Denis Farrell.)

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On April 20, 2015, over [20](#) former Nigerian soldiers who “were part of the 850 members of the 15th Battalion of the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission sent to Liberia between September 2007 and April 2008” asked President-elect Muhammadu Buhari to reinstate them. After their peacekeeping deployment, the soldiers were [sentenced](#) to life in prison and forcibly retired in 2009 for mutinying over nonpayment of their peacekeeping entitlements. Their sentences were later reduced to seven years. But the soldiers still [want](#) what is owed to them: “I want them to compensate us. We are looking up to Gen. Buhari to look into our case. He has been a soldier and he would appreciate the enormity of the injustice done to us.” Recent [research](#) documents a number of other peacekeeping-related mutinies in West Africa. Do international peacekeeping deployments fuel mutiny in Africa? [more...](#)



A United Nations peacekeeper from Nigeria is reflected in mirrored glass outside the office of opposition leader George Weah, not pictured, who is being protected by seven U.N. soldiers, at opposition party headquarters in Monrovia, Liberia Wednesday, Nov. 9, 2011. (Source: AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell.)

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The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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South Africa's History of Xenophobia

Xenophobia, or fear of foreigners, is not a new phenomenon in South Africa. Under apartheid, a race-based oligarchy in which the white elites controlled virtually all economic resources and made most social and political decisions, the South African government strictly regulated the movement of people, especially Africans from other countries, through its borders. Cheap labor needs aside, the politics of apartheid made assimilation into such a racialized society very difficult.

After the end of apartheid, the new South African government continued to maintain a [highly restrictive immigration policy](#). Immigrants were viewed as an economic and social threat to ordinary South Africans. In 2002, the government reformulated its migration policy. Part of the goal of the new policy was to [address xenophobic attitudes](#), but little of substance emerged.

Violence targeted against immigrants, however, is a more recent development. The most notable—and fatal—attacks occurred in May 2008. South African mobs specifically attacked immigrants from Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and other African countries. Many of their homes and businesses were destroyed. Over the course of a week, [more than 20 foreign nationals](#) were killed and thousands chased from their homes. By the time the violence subsided, [more than 60 in total were killed](#).

Why Xenophobia?

South Africa is often viewed as substantially different from its continental counterparts due to its unique history and more favorable economic development. It currently boasts one of the [higher per capita incomes](#) in sub-Saharan Africa, and its total gross domestic product is only slightly less than that of [Nigeria](#), which overtook South Africa in 2014.

The country's relative stability and prosperity make it a common destination for other Africans. Refugees seeking peace or economic opportunities have poured across the country's multiple borders. Estimates of how many foreign nationals are illegally residing in South Africa range from [4 percent](#) to [11 percent](#) of the total population of 52 million.

Those seeking opportunity, however, are often surprised to find that South Africa's prosperity is not inclusive. The country is considered by many to be one of the [least equal societies](#) in the world, with almost [50 percent of the population](#) living in extreme poverty. Official unemployment hovers between 25 and 35 percent, numbers similar to those at the end of the apartheid era.

Xenophobic attacks are almost always committed by poor black South Africans against other poor Africans. Those organizing and supporting the violence assert that foreign nationals commit more crimes than ordinary South Africans and that foreign nationals take jobs away from South Africans, contributing to the country's endemic poverty.



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Many political elites have either been complicit in reinforcing these stereotypes or, in a few isolated instances, have publicly encouraged them. The most recent attacks were preceded by inflammatory statements by Zulu king Goodwill Zwelthini that referred to foreigners as “lice” and requested [“foreign nationals to pack their belongings and be sent back.”](#)

Governments Respond

The official response from the South African government has been criticized as being [slow](#) and inadequate. President Zuma, in an open letter published on April 28, thanked neighboring countries for their assistance during apartheid and asked that the international community not interpret the actions of a few as the beliefs of the many. But he also noted that there were [some valid concerns](#) raised by those organizing the violence. He indicated that it might be time for South Africa to again re-evaluate its immigration policy.

Relations with several other African countries have been strained by the violence. Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania have all [repatriated](#) citizens who have fled the violence. Rumors that the Nigerian envoy to South Africa has been recalled have been [dismissed by the government](#) of Nigeria as inaccurate, but Nigeria’s High Commissioner in South Africa will be returning to Nigeria for [“consultations”](#) on the situation.

Conclusion

Economic, social, and political inequality was a grim reality in apartheid South Africa and continues to pose a problem for the current government, even after 20 years of democracy. Foreign nationals are being used as convenient scapegoats for South Africa’s many ills, but they are not the problem. Until poverty, unemployment, and inequality are adequately addressed, the threat of civil violence in South Africa will be constant. The country should look inward for solutions rather than directing blame outward.

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Unintended Consequences: “Peacekeeping Abroad, Troublemaking at Home”

In contrast to past academic research that emphasized the [salutary](#) impact of international peacekeeping on domestic civil-military relations, recent studies suggest a link between international peacekeeping deployments and destabilizing military behavior at home. An article by Maggie Dwyer [published](#) this year in *African Affairs* argues that out of [24](#) overall cases of mutiny in West Africa from 1991 to 2012, “at least ten mutinies in West Africa since 1991 have been related to grievances by soldiers who participated in peacekeeping missions.” A mutiny is distinct from a coup, as mutinies do not aim to overthrow heads of state. Instead, a mutiny is a collective revolt over “[communal](#) complaints” by soldiers against their leadership, often carried out by enlisted troops. Mutinies can lead to military coups, however, as seen in [Mali](#) in 2012, when Captain Amadou Sanogo’s mutiny over lack of equipment quickly morphed into a successful coup.

Dwyer [cites](#) peacekeeping-related mutinies once soldiers returned home in nine countries in Africa since the early 1990s: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cote d’Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, and Nigeria. Based on interviews with mutineers, Dwyer finds that international peacekeeping deployments often led to material grievances among peacekeepers, as well as a sense of injustice. She [maintains](#), “While peacekeepers are meant to contribute to the resolution of foreign conflicts, a pattern of mutinies in the wake of these missions indicates that at times their participation can lead to new grievances and exacerbate existing tensions within the contributing country’s military.”

Grievances include problems and lack of transparency with pay and lengths of deployment. Also, peacekeeping experiences can foster resentment toward senior officers and politicians, some of whom are regarded as corrupt. A soldier from Sierra Leone [noted](#) that peacekeepers “are not happy, they are grumbling. [US\$]1,225 [is sent] to [the] country [supplying the peacekeepers] but we only get 400. We do not know what the government is using the money for.” Exposure to soldiers from other countries also allows peacekeepers to compare their situations to others in the region, adding substance to grievances. In [addition](#) to disparities in pay, “differences between countries regarding uniforms, food, equipment, leadership styles. . . have also served as a basis for grievances among peacekeepers.”

Findings Beyond Africa

Separate [research](#) presented by Jesse Dillon Savage and Jonathan Caverley at the Sixth Oceanic Conference on International Studies at the University of Melbourne in 2014 also finds an association between peacekeeping and military instability. Although they propose a different process through which this occurs, their work lends some support to Dwyer’s findings. Savage and Caverley’s statistical study encompasses the period from 1990 to 2009, looking at the relationship

between peacekeeping deployments worldwide and “destabilizing events carried out by the military,” a category that includes coups as well as mutinies. They largely depart from Dwyer’s grievance-based explanation, arguing that peacekeeper training increases the “[human capital](#)” of soldiers: “By increasing the human capital, training provides soldiers with increased capacity to carry out political actions [once returned home], and reduces the risk that they may be punished due to their increased value to the regime and their international connections.”

In addition, the authors posit that by working together in foreign environments, peacekeepers will have the opportunity to network and build cohesion as a group, which [may](#) “help overcome collective action problems” and aid in launching a mutiny or coup back home. After controlling for other factors, Savage and Caverley run a regression and [find](#) a “statistically significant, and substantially important, association between peacekeeper commitments and destabilizing events carried out by the military.”

Conclusion

More research needs to be done to further flesh out, refine, and rigorously test the proposed theories and mechanisms outlined above. That said, these recent studies offer new and perhaps counterintuitive evidence of the potential unintended consequences of international peacekeeping in Africa. If these findings are substantiated by further analysis, two policy implications follow from the above discussion.

First, transparency is needed from troop-contributing governments regarding peacekeeping costs and peacekeeper salaries. As Dwyer points out, while the UN publicly publishes what it pays troop-contributing governments, troop-contributing governments often are not transparent about how these salaries are used to cover costs and to pay peacekeepers, leading to perceptions of corruption that can result in mutinies, as noted in the case of Sierra Leone. Second, in addition to improving operational capabilities, training for peacekeepers should place a greater emphasis on instilling norms of civilian control of the military and professionalism in peacekeepers. These steps might help minimize the potentially harmful unintended consequences of peacekeeping.

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