



AFRICAN NARRATIVES

# South Africa's migrant crisis: between internal pressures and escalating violence



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### Introduction

South Africa has witnessed escalating waves of violence against migrants from various African countries in the form of diverse attacks on migrants and foreigners, making it a recurring phenomenon driven by a range of economic and social factors such as increased poverty rates, unemployment, and the adoption by some South African nationalist movements of an anti-immigrant discourse that makes them a cause of deteriorating services, rising poverty and unemployment rates, and increased crime rates, which raises questions about the nature and causes of the phenomenon.

The South African economy is one of the largest

economies on the African continent, and one of the most attractive to immigrants seeking job opportunities that guarantee them a better life and standard of living. Despite this, the increase in the rate of immigration to South Africa is accompanied by some social and security tensions, as well as an increase in violence in general towards immigrants, which raises the question of whether the rise in the phenomenon of violence against foreigners and immigrants in South Africa is a result of economic pressures, or an indication of a deeper crisis related to the structure of the South African state, and its policy towards the immigration issue?

## Executive Summary

This paper discusses the escalating crisis of violence against migrants in South Africa, analyzing its historical roots, patterns, driving factors, and internal and regional repercussions. It shows that South Africa has been one of the continent's leading migration destinations for decades, owing to the size of its economy and the relative stability of its political institutions compared with many neighboring countries — a role that has nonetheless been accompanied by escalating and recurring waves of violence against migrants.

The study concludes that violence against migrants cannot be explained solely by high rates of unemployment and poverty or pressure on

public services. It is also linked to the exploitation of the immigration issue for electoral mobilization, as some political and populist forces adopt a discourse that blames immigrants for the country's economic and social crises — entrenching hatred and lending social legitimacy to acts of violence. This carries serious implications for South Africa's internal security, negatively affects its relations with a number of African countries, and threatens regional integration efforts across the continent, making clear that addressing the phenomenon requires a comprehensive approach that tackles its structural causes rather than merely its security manifestations.

## First: The historical context of South Africa's development as a major destination for migration within the African continent

South Africa possesses numerous advantages that have made it one of the most attractive destinations for migrants within the African continent. Among the most significant is its status as one of the continent's largest economies, relying on vital sectors such as mining and manufacturing, which positions it as a middle-income country. South Africa achieved GDP growth of 1.1% in 2025, with projections indicating growth to 1.2% in 2026 and 1.6% in 2027, according to estimates by the African Development Bank. South Africa also possesses stable democratic institutions, which has contributed to the stability of its political life and positively impacted its overall internal conditions. This has made it one of the continent's largest destinations for immigration, hosting approximately 2.9 million immigrants.

This number is likely to increase due to the influx of a large number of illegal immigrants from neighboring countries seeking better living opportunities in South Africa.

South Africa witnessed historical milestones that significantly contributed to making it a destination for immigrants, most notably the arrival and control of the country by European colonizers. With the start of Dutch colonization in 1652 and British colonization in 1752, colonizers began establishing new settlements within South Africa, such as Cape Town was relied upon as a port for trade and transporting European goods to India and China. With the increase in trade and the expansion of colonies, the colonizers needed more manpower to manage the settlements. Therefore, the Dutch and British resorted to

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1 African Development Bank, South Africa Economic Outlook, Accessed On 17 June 2026.  
<https://shorturl.at/ueA9S>

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2 Khangelani Moyo, South Africa Reckons with Its Status as a Top Immigration Destination, Apartheid History, and Economic Challenges, Migration Policy Institute, Accessed on 17 June 2026.  
<https://shorturl.at/VvHBz>

relying on slaves as manpower, most of whom were Africans. When Britain banned slavery in 1883, it had brought with the Netherlands approximately 65,000 slaves to South Africa, more than 25% of whom were from the African continent.

South Africa discovered its vast gold and diamond reserves at the end of the 19th century, a pivotal moment that attracted immigrants due to the economic boom fueled by the development of the mining sector. This influx drew migrants from various parts of the world, particularly neighboring countries such as Malawi, Mozambique, Lesotho, Botswana, and Swaziland. By the beginning of the 20th century, the number of African workers employed in South African mining reached approximately 94,000. With the increasing number of migrant workers, South Africa enacted its first immigration law in 1913 to control immigration. This legislation allowed only male workers to enter the country without their families, segregating them into isolated residen-

tial areas and permitting them to remain for only one year. This was part of the white minority regime's efforts to restrict the Black majority by applying the immigration law to all African workers, whether they were immigrants from other countries or already residing within South Africa. Despite these restrictions, South Africa remained a major mining nation, attracting continued migration. In 1970, the number of workers in mining within the country reached approximately 30,000 workers, which is a percentage that exceeds 80% of the workers in this field at that time.

The apartheid regime's policies affected migration to and within South Africa. Between 1947 and 1994, the apartheid government implemented a forced resettlement campaign of approximately 3.4 million people, including 2.7 million black residents, to achieve a political goal of eliminating black areas. This meant preventing displaced residents from owning land in areas designated only for white people. This was part of the many discriminatory



3 Berenike Schauwinhold, South Africa, History of Migration, Federal Agency for Civic Education, Accessed on 17 June 2026. <https://shorturl.at/iHqRJ>

4 Berenike Schauwinhold, South Africa, History of Migration, IBID.

policies practiced by the apartheid regime in its persecution of the black majority in South Africa during this period. This regime, especially in the 1980s, coincided with many wars and crises in South Africa's neighboring countries, making it a safe haven and an attractive destination for migration. Of course, the apartheid regime tightened border controls to prevent refugees and migrants from entering the country, while allowing them to remain in border areas.

The end of the apartheid regime was a turning point in the history of South Africa in general, and in the movement of immigration to it in particular. After the demise of this regime, the movement of immigration to the country witnessed a remarkable increase. According to the South African Statistics Agency, the country

hosted 916,300 immigrants in the period from 2011 to 2016, and 853,000 immigrants in the period from 2016 to 2021.

The largest number of migrants to South Africa come from its neighbors, especially Zimbabwe, from which more than one million people have migrated to South Africa, followed by Mozambique with more than 400,000 migrants, followed by Lesotho and Malawi respectively with more than 200,000 migrants each, and then Ethiopia with more than 100,000 migrants, in search of job opportunities that provide them with better living conditions, in addition to South Africa's relative political stability compared to these countries, despite the challenges currently facing migrants from escalating violence and hate speech against them.

## Major countries from which migrants come to South Africa

Number of immigrants	State
1.7 million	Zimbabwe
412,000	Mozambique
238,000	Lesotho
210,000	Malawi
104,000	Ethiopia

Source:  
World Data Canvas, South Africa  
<https://shorturl.at/wgFV7>

5 Berenike Schauwinhold, South Africa, History of Migration, IBID.

6 Migration Policy Institute, South Africa Reckons with Its Status as a Top Immigration Destination, Apartheid History, and Economic Challenges, Accessed on 18 June 2026. <https://shorturl.at/abnR1>



## Second: The nature and patterns of the phenomenon of violence against immigrants and foreigners.

South Africa has witnessed many developments in recent years, including an escalation of violence against foreigners and immigrants in the country. This violence has manifested itself in the restriction of refugees' rights, the emergence of hate speech against them, and the appearance of armed groups that attack immigrants in the streets. This violence has reached its peak, resulting in the deaths of many immigrants in South Africa. The phenomenon of violence is evident at both the popular and governmental levels.

The phenomenon of violence against migrants became more apparent at the governmental level, particularly as South Africa faced the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This was reflected in measures taken by the South African government against migrants under the guise of controlling the pandemic's spread, including denying migrants access to government relief programs such as food parcels and vouchers that the state provided to ease the economic burden of the lockdown and the resulting recession on citizens in particular and all residents in general. This was reinforced by public statements from South African officials implying that protecting South Africans from the coronavirus took priority over protecting migrants. The government also carried out a project, under the pretext of containing the spread of the virus, to build a 40-kilometer fence costing 37 million rand along the border with Zimbabwe to prevent the entry of infected or undocumented individuals — notably at a time when South Africa had 1,845 confirmed cases, among the highest in Africa, while Zimbabwe had

only 11. This border closure stands as a clear example of the strong nationalist motives behind the South African government's portrayal of migrants as disease carriers. Some politicians also exploited the pandemic to mobilize citizens against migrants, as seen in the decision by South African Minister for Small Business Development Khumbudzo Ntshavheni to close Spaza shops owned by foreigners under the pretext of ensuring product quality — a move that portrayed migrant-owned stores as outlets for counterfeit, substandard, and even poisoned goods, further fueling public mobilization against migrants.

The phenomenon of violence against migrants was also evident at the grassroots level, with the emergence of anti-immigrant movements. The most prominent of these was “Put South Africans First,” which appeared on the platform X (formerly Twitter) during the initial COVID-19 lockdown, specifically on April 27, 2020 — a period that saw a sharp rise in anti-immigrant hashtags, with “#PutSouthAfricansFirst” used 16,000 times in a single day. Anti-immigrant protest marches were also organized, most notably one held under the hashtags “#September-CleanSA23” and “#ForeignersMustGo” on X, which headed toward several African embassies, including those of Nigeria and Zimbabwe, with protesters demanding that these embassies repatriate their citizens from South Africa. Other movements also emerged, including a vigilante group and the political party known as Operation Dudula, based in the South African city of Soweto. Operation Dudula carried out a campaign called “Clean Up Soweto,”



aimed at driving out illegal migrants and foreign business owners; the campaign succeeded in expelling migrants from Zimbabwe and Mozambique, though it also led to the mistaken expulsion of some South African citizens believed to be migrants. Another movement, March & March, emerged as one of the prominent anti-migrant groups. Founded in March 2025, it gained widespread popularity in South Africa and successfully organized numerous protests against the presence of migrants in cities including Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban, and Kogombo. The movement set June 30 as a deadline for undocumented migrants and those residing illegally in South Africa to leave the country, without specifying what would happen to those who failed to comply. Given the conditions migrants already face and the threats against them, this deadline can reasonably be seen as a form of threat that neither migrants nor the South African government should ignore.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the phenomenon of violence against migrants in South Africa is characterized by escalation, entrenchment, and diverse forms. It is not limited to hostile rhetoric confined to social media; rather, it is organized

and has a direct impact that goes beyond verbal abuse or threats, having been adopted by organized movements, as previously discussed. Its effects have driven large numbers of migrants to leave South Africa and return to their home countries out of fear of this hostile rhetoric, and have even extended to migrant fatalities. According to Xenowatch, a project affiliated with the University of the Witwatersrand, xenophobic and anti-migrant attacks between 1994 and 2024 resulted in 669 deaths, 127,572 displaced persons, and the looting of 5,310 foreign-owned businesses; in May 2008 alone, the country witnessed such attacks in more than 135 locations. More recently, the Mozambican government announced the deaths of five of its citizens and the return of 300 of its nationals from South Africa following repeated attacks by anti-immigrant gangs and groups. This confirms that the phenomenon of violence is escalating and takes multiple forms — from calls on social media to real threats that culminate in violent acts such as looting and murder — and that it is organized, adopted by groups with a clear objective, while also finding a degree of popularity among some politicians and officials within the state.

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8 Bastien Dratwa, *Xenophobia: A Pervasive Crisis in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, IBID.

9 Rachel Savage, 'Extreme fear' among immigrants as backlash sweeps South Africa, *The Guardian*, Accessed on 19 June 2026. <https://shorturl.at/FI4vA>

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10 Rachel Savage, 'Extreme fear' among immigrants as backlash sweeps South Africa, *The Guardian*, Accessed on 19 June 2026. <https://shorturl.at/FI4vA>

## Third: The most important factors contributing to the increase in the phenomenon of violence against foreigners in South Africa.

There are many factors contributing to the increase in violence against foreigners and immigrants in South Africa. Besides the fact that this phenomenon is not new, but rather appears in the form of escalating waves of violence and discrimination against foreigners every so often, economic and political factors are driving the phenomenon to escalate, most notably the high rates of poverty and unemployment, the increasing pressure on government facilities which reduces the quality of services provided to citizens, as well as the adoption of anti-immigrant rhetoric by some political parties and groups to achieve goals such as winning elections, whether local or parliamentary.

High rates of poverty, unemployment, and inequality are among the economic factors exploited by anti-immigrant movements. South Africa's unemployment rate rose to 31.4% in the first quarter of 2026, an increase of an estimated 301,000 people, bringing the total number of unemployed to 8,137.

Some parties — including the National Alliance Party, ActionSA, and uMkhonto weSizwe — portray migrants as competitors for jobs and as a cause of declining service quality, blaming them for the strain placed on public facilities in South Africa and further fueling public anger against immigration. In this context, a member of the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA) stated that “some anti-immigrant groups are growing due to widespread frustration over unemployment, economic and social problems, and the lack of effort to reduce inequality.” Regarding poverty, World Bank statistics show that the poverty rate fell from 46.7% in 2015 to 37.9% in 2023 . Despite this

decline, the poverty rate remains high in South Africa, compounding the difficulties of daily life for citizens — who are often told that immigrants are one of the main causes of their poverty and unemployment, due to competition for jobs between citizens and migrants, as well as pressure on government resources and facilities.

Despite these economic problems and the high rates of poverty and unemployment for which migration is cited as a major contributing factor, Nigerian Consul General Ninikanwa Okey-Uche stated that immigrants make up less than 10% of South Africa's population and cannot be blamed for the country's high poverty and unemployment rates or the poor quality of services such as education, health, and security. Immigrants, he said, are not the cause of these problems. Rather, they are being sacrificed by being scapegoated as a direct cause, which only reinforces feelings of hatred and hostility toward them.

Politically, the issue of immigration is exploited in every election cycle by some political parties seeking to garner votes. These parties employ populist, anti-immigrant rhetoric that capitalizes on widespread public discontent in South Africa stemming from high rates of unemployment, crime, poverty, and the poor quality of some government services — rhetoric that resonates with a segment of the population that believes immigrants are a major cause of the country's economic and security problems. Among the parties that have adopted this anti-immigrant discourse is the Inkatha Freedom Party, which has called for stricter border controls to protect the South African labor market; the National Alliance Party, which has called for stricter immigration policies to protect state resources; and Freedom Front Plus, which calls for tighter

11 Trading Economics, South Africa Unemployment Rate, Accessed on 20 June.  
<https://shorturl.at/ZW5MO>

12 Why are anti-migrant attacks increasing in South Africa? Aljazeera, accessed on 21 June.  
<https://shorturl.at/CwYlq>

13 Mayeni Jones, Makuochi Okafor, Nigeria evacuates citizens from South Africa as anti-migrant rise sentiments, BBC, Accessed on 22 June.  
<https://shorturl.at/5xNZ5>

14 World Bank, OVERVIEW: SOUTH AFRICA, Accessed on 21 June.  
<https://shorturl.at/wnPkw>

control over immigration to protect the state's cultural identity.

On the political level as well, alongside some parties' exploitation of the immigration issue to garner votes in elections, language itself plays a role in escalating violence against migrants. Certain terms associated with anti-immigration campaigns, such as "cleansing" and "criminals," are far from neutral and influence how citizens think and act toward migrants. When migrants

are portrayed as criminals from whom the state must be cleansed, committing violence against them comes to be seen as normal by a large segment of South African citizens who are dissatisfied with their living conditions and are told that migrants are one of the reasons for their hardship. But even if migrants were the cause of a given problem or set of problems, the solution would not lie in violence against them, but in addressing the real, structural causes that South Africa is grappling with.

## Fourth : The internal and international repercussions of the escalating violence against migrants in South Africa.

The escalating violence against migrants has had serious repercussions, both within South Africa and in its relations with other countries. Domestically, the renewed violence has revived memories of the 2021 riots in South Africa, which left more than 100 people dead and caused billions of dollars in economic losses due to disrupted supply chains and damaged infrastructure, while also fostering distrust in the government's and its institutions' ability to contain unrest and mitigate its negative consequences. As a result of the escalating violence, some countries have begun evacuating their citizens from South Africa: Nigeria evacuated 268 citizens at the beginning of June, while Ghana evacuated 300 of its citizens last May, with a further 800 Ghanaian citizens

registering their wish to leave South Africa over fears for their safety. The violence is expected to escalate further, particularly as some anti-immigrant movements have set June 30 as a deadline for migrants to leave South Africa, without specifying what measures they will take against those who remain. Given the current climate and the prevalence of hate speech in South Africa, there is a real possibility that violence and unrest will intensify after this deadline. The government must therefore take preventive measures, and security services must be fully prepared to avert this scenario and its negative repercussions — both economic and human — while working to restore citizens' confidence in the government's ability to maintain security and order.

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15 Margaret Monyani, Mmabatho Mongae, South Africa's GNU faces an uphill battle on migration policy, Institute For Security Studies, Accessed on 22 June.  
<https://shorturl.at/OBWfv>

16 Luke Sinwell, Terri Maggott, Trevor Ngwane, South Africa's anti-migrant campaigns use the language of democracy: why that's dangerous, Polity, Accessed on 23 June.  
<https://shorturl.at/h3cR7>

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17 Haseena Majid, Behind SA's migration tensions lies a deeper crisis of institutional trust and accountability, Daily Maverick, Accessed on 23 June 2026.  
<https://shorturl.at/20sYw>

18 Mayeni Jones, Makuochi Okafor, Nigeria evacuates citizens from South Africa as anti-migrant rise sentiments, BBC, Accessed on 23 June 2026.  
<https://shorturl.at/VNJUE>

19 Mayeni Jones, Thomas Naadi, First Ghanaians evacuated from South Africa over immigration protests land in Accra, BBC, Accessed on 23 June 2026.  
<https://tinyurl.com/yjye68ss>

Internationally, the escalating violence against migrants in South Africa has caused tensions with several African countries. For example, Nigerian Foreign Minister Bianca Odumegwu-Ojukwu accused the South African government of failing to condemn the escalating violence against migrants, warning that this was damaging the decades-long relationship between the two countries. Ghanaian Foreign Minister Samuel Okudze-to Ablakwa likewise stated that Accra had formally requested that the attacks targeting African migrants in South Africa be placed on the agenda of the African Union meeting scheduled for June 27, and confirmed that Ghana was considering international legal action against South Africa over the violence perpetrated against its citizens, having already informed South Africa of the need to hold those responsible accountable and

compensate the victims. These statements were met with a counter-statement from South Africa's Foreign Minister, who indicated that South Africa would vigorously defend itself against any legal action brought by Ghana. This has deepened tensions between the two countries and could expose South African communities abroad to similar threats in retaliation, further straining relations between South Africa and countries such as Ghana and Nigeria. Such tensions threaten the broader project of African integration, which depends fundamentally on stable relations among the continent's states in support of integrating African markets, promoting intra-regional trade, and reducing customs duties — a project that would itself be jeopardized should relations between African countries deteriorate further.

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20 Shola Lawal, Why are Nigeria-South Africa tensions rising amid xenophobic attacks? Aljazeera, , Accessed on 23 June 2026. <https://tinyurl.com/38ymwc4e>

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21 South Africa accused of failing to crack down on anti-immigrant violence, Radio France Internationale, Accessed on 23 June 2026. <https://tinyurl.com/4zphz8s8>





## Conclusion

It is clear that the rise in violence against migrants in South Africa reflects a complex crisis with intertwined economic, social, and political dimensions, rather than simply a reaction to growing numbers of immigrants. Although immigrants are often portrayed in political discourse as a cause of declining job opportunities, rising crime, and strain on public services, the reality is that these problems stem primarily from structural challenges facing the South African state — such as unemployment, poverty, inequality, and the inefficiency of some institutions — while the immigration issue is being used as a means of diverting public anger away from the real causes of the crisis.

The persistence of hate speech, the rise of anti-immigrant movements, and the widening circle of violence against foreigners threaten not only security and stability within South Africa, but also its relations with other African countries, undermining efforts at regional integration and cooperation among the continent's nations. This makes addressing the phenomenon a security and political imperative, not merely a humanitarian or social issue. Based on the above, the research paper recommends the following:

- The South African government needs to adopt a national strategy to combat violence against migrants that combines addressing some of the structural causes of high unemployment and poverty rates, which are causing resentment among a large segment of the population, with working to improve the quality of government services provided to citizens.
- Strengthening cooperation with neighboring countries and the African Union to develop joint mechanisms for managing regular migration, combating illegal migration, and protecting the rights of migrants.
- Applying the law firmly against perpetrators of violence and promoters of hate speech, with a guarantee against impunity, will enhance the trust of citizens and migrants in state institutions and help prevent the use of the immigration issue in political and electoral speeches in ways that fuel hatred or hold migrants responsible for internal crises.