

## **'Why has SA become so violent?'**

Bishop Rubin Phillip, Bishop of the Anglican Diocese in Natal (KZN).

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It really does seem that violence and pain is a growing feature of our national life. The current of xenophobic attacks is a very visible sign but I'm sure we can all think of other areas marked by violence and intolerance - whether it be the pandemic scourge of male violence against women, or heavy-handed and highly-militarised policing of public protest, or needlessly violent criminal acts, or road rage.

Many analysts remind us that the inherent violence of the apartheid system has done deep and lasting damage to us all. That is true – but surely we were not simply naive to hope that having struggled so valiantly against apartheid's values and dehumanisation, we would move away from force and violence rather than repeat it?

The violent and hateful xenophobic attacks we are seeing now, make constructive, thoughtful and inclusive problem-solving and dialogue all the more difficult. That is a double tragedy – not only are the victims of this violence hurt, displaced and abused, but the space to deal carefully and thoroughly with the underlying issues that are feeding the attackers' rage is threatened. And here lies our challenge: xenophobia and its attendant violence is wrong and must be condemned, but the factors behind it must be attended to.

Questions of truth, justice and humanity are invariably simple. In situations of choice, the basic thrust of the true, just and human option is blindingly obvious to anyone who thinks – and the capacity for thought is one we all share. The horror of xenophobic violence is one of those situations that is marked by both simplicity and complexity. Simplicity relates to matters of principle and ethics, while complexity relates to the causes and what to do about them.

The idea that a situation is complex is too often used as an excuse for delaying immediate and principled action. We need to say loudly and clearly: this hatred is wrong; every person is deserving of love, respect, and acceptance simply because they are human. This is the only basis for a true, just and humane way forward. Considerations of history and geography, our culture and identity, can all contribute positively to our life, but finally have nothing to do with the inherent dignity and value of every human being.

Nonetheless, while it does not in any way excuse attitudes of hatred and practices of violence, we must recognise that this wave of xenophobic violence expresses real anger and desperation at the base of our society. Xenophobic violence is emphatically *not* a solution, but we do face a series of deep, interlocking challenges or crises in our political, economic and social systems.

Despite the promise and hope of a post-apartheid future, far too many fellow South Africans must daily face:

- An economy marked by worsening inequality and unemployment and poverty and that either ejects them as superfluous or exploits them in degrading jobs;
- A political system that cynically preys on people's hope for a better life only to secure a license for elite plunder and power; and
- A social system under unbearable strain and offering little space and resources for comfort or humanising nurture.

These challenges require of all of us a serious and radically democratic conversation to create new, humane and inclusive possibilities for our collective future. In that conversation we have to go way beyond patching up and reforming the political, economic and social systems that currently dominate.

Much as the immediate consequences of the attacks on foreigners require immediate acts of charity, protection and protest, it is our collective responsibility to look unflinchingly in the mirror they provide us with, and confront what they reveal about ourselves, what we are becoming, and our deepest challenges.

On April 6, I and other religious leaders visited hundreds of foreign nationals who have fled their homes to take shelter in tented camps in Isipingo.

I held little Victor Rukara in my arms. He's just three and comes from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The cross pendent I wear fascinated him. Victor could not have known that this central symbol of Christianity is marked with the violence of Jesus' death - but also stands for the hope of a victory of life over death.

Let us think seriously and creatively about what we can do to stop the violence, and build peace, life and hope.