EXPLAINING VIOLENCE AGAINST FOREIGNERS AND STRANGERS IN URBAN SOUTH AFRICA: OUTBURSTS DURING MAY AND JUNE 2008

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“The underlying reasons for the violence included high unemployment, inequality, a lax border control policy, and a nonexistent immigration policy.”¹ “[T]he emergence of xenophobic violence is typically rooted in the micro-politics of township life.”² “Anti-foreigner sentiment expressed uncritically in the media or from official channels can… contribute to… (such) sentiment in the popular discourse.”³ “[I]t was stupid of the police… People have been moved by the police so (shops were) targeted by the youth” (focus group participant, reported in Cooper)⁴

1. Introduction

During the second half of May 2008 (and continuing through the first week of June), a series of short violent outbursts took place in

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neighbourhoods of numerous South African cities and towns. The violence during these outbursts was perpetrated by civilians, and was inflicted on the property and the person of civilians. The perpetrators were largely young poor black South African men; the targets largely the property and businesses of foreign African nationals as well as these civilians themselves; and the locations predominantly urban informal settlements, townships and hostels. The series of outbursts began in Gauteng and spread about a week after the first serious event to other urban areas of the country, Cape Town and the Western Cape in particular. Initial state reaction was evasive, essentially denying the scope and seriousness of these events. Subsequently, as the series of events spread across the country, the state sought explanations in criminal and mob behaviour. This geographic spread of outbursts was accompanied by widespread coverage in the mass media – television, radio and newspapers – of these events and their possible causes. Since the reaction of many of the victims was flight from their residential areas, a number of temporary refugee camps were established (in Gauteng and Cape Town, in particular). During the aftermath of these outbursts, more than 20 000 refugees were accommodated in this way, numerous African foreign nationals were reported to have left the country, and government urged refugees in camps to return to the residential areas from which they had fled since these were said to have calmed down.

As the four prefatory quotations above reveal, explanations offered for these outbursts vary widely. The South African research community appears to have been caught as unaware and bewildered about the events of May and June 2008 as the political, state and economic elites. This may have to do with the episodic nature of these events that suddenly shattered assumptions of apparent peacefulness and may also have to do with their predispositions that poor black urban residents were victims entitled to a better urban life and accordingly entitled to manifest their dissatisfaction by protest and demonstration. The nature of the actions of the perpetrators, in terms of this characterization of the poor urban resident, is surely both out of character and deeply distasteful, particularly since it may be read as a betrayal of friendship on the African continent, a case of “black-on-black” violence.