

## **CASE STUDY 05: XENOPHOBIA, THE CASE OF POOR GOVERNMENT POLICIES, NO LEADERSHIP, NO COMMUNICATION AND ‘CRISIS, WHAT CRISIS?’**

The recent horrific xenophobic attacks by South African township residents on foreigners from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Somalia, Malawi and Nigeria have once again highlighted the lack of crisis leadership, crisis planning and management capabilities in the Government of the Republic of South Africa.

“While many commentators correctly looked at the Government’s inability to take control of the situation and communicate, best practice crisis management requires that once the crisis is over, a detailed post mortem of the events as they unfolded must occur to identify the root causes of the problem. The next step would be to put in place measures to ensure the crisis never happens again. Government would be well advised to reconsider its management of the Zimbabwe and Mozambican borders, its Home Affairs policies on refugees and the alleged general corruption in various Government departments involved in the crisis,” says Evan Bloom, MD of the Crisis Communications Consultancy.

“In any business crisis, it is the role of the CEO/MD to take control of the situation by activating the crisis management plan and proactively communicating openly and honestly with all stakeholders, internal and external. Keeping quiet allows the rumour mill to spread rapidly; it permits the media to take control and report on the events and, most importantly, it makes management look like it has lost control of the situation. This is exactly what happened to the Government during the xenophobic attacks,” adds Bloom.

Not one Government minister had the courage and foresight to take charge of the situation from day one. In any civilised country where accountability reigns supreme, heads would quickly have rolled.

The following case study will look at the timeline of events as they unfolded and will also discuss what Government should have done to establish control of the situation.

### **The background:**

The following timeline has been created simply to show in which areas and how long ago the attacks started (The Mail & Guardian, May 23-29):

**March 17:** Gauteng: Choba, Tshwane

**March 19:** Gauteng: Atteridgeville, Tshwane

**March 31:** Gauteng: Diepsloot, near Sandton

**April 11:** Gauteng: Diepsloot, near Sandton

**April 14-17:** Gauteng: Mamelodi, near Tshwane

**May 5:** Eastern Cape: Near Uitenhage

**May 11 onwards:** Gauteng: Alexandra near Sandton, the East Rand and parts of Johannesburg (Cleveland, Reiger Park, Primrose, etc). May 11 was the date when all out attacks against foreigners began.

**May 20:** Kwa-Zulu: Umbilo near Durban

**May 20:** Mpumalanga: Leslie and Secunda

**May 21:** North West: Oukasie near Brits

**May 22-23:** Cape Province: Du Noon near Tableview (The Star, Friday 23 May 2008)

While the entire situation was tragic, one event grabbed the hearts of South Africans. On May 18<sup>th</sup> in Reiger Park, a gang attacked a Mozambican and beat him up. They then took a blanket, covered it in petrol, threw it over him, set him alight and looked on as a bystander burst out laughing. The man later died of his severe injuries (The Star, 19 May 2008).

Finally, on May 21, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) was called in to support the police. The violence started to decrease and work began in earnest to sort out the horrific events.

By Thursday 22 May, The Star newspaper gave the grim statistics: 42 dead, 15,000 displaced and 400 arrests in 11 days of violence. On Saturday May 24, The Star reported that after 13 days of rioting, 43 people had died, 23,000 were displaced, it was estimated that the cost of dealing with the crisis was R100 million and 531 people had been arrested. By Monday, May 26, The Star reported that there were now 25,000 refugees. The figures continued to climb with the Mail & Guardian (June 6 – 12, 2008) reporting that since the xenophobic attacks started on 11 May, there were 37,500 foreign nationals displaced, 19,453 from Gauteng province, 14,144 from the Western Cape province and 1,700 from Kwa-Zulu Natal province. Across South Africa, 34 refugee shelters were set up and since the start of the attacks approximately 37,000 foreigners fled South Africa.

While it is impossible to effectively relay all the pain and suffering that occurred in this case study, consider this: People were hacked with machetes; assaulted with pipes, concrete blocks and pick axe handles; stoned; women, including pregnant women were allegedly raped; neighbourhood police stations became makeshift refugee camps overnight; refugees had their meagre possessions stolen; township business were looted; cars set alight and about 100 foreign and blind street beggars became refugees at the Jeppe Police station. Non-governmental organisations including the SA Red Cross, Salvation Army, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies and Medicines Sans Frontiers, amongst others, mobilised to start feeding, clothe and shelter the refugees.

So what should Government have done to communicate and manage the situation effectively?

### **Take immediate control of the situation**

As soon as the unrest started, President Mbeki should have made an immediate announcement about the unfolding events (remember the golden rule is to tell it all, tell it fast and tell it openly). This would have helped him begin to take control of the situation. He should then have convened an immediate crisis meeting of his Ministers for Safety and Security, National Intelligence, Home Affairs, Defence and Social Services. A rapid plan of action should have been thrashed out, agreed on and rolled out. This plan should have also been communicated to the media, South Africans and all stakeholders to limit speculation and rumour mongering.

### **President Mbeki should have taken centre stage and been the key spokesperson**

The president should have communicated on a daily basis to the media and the country as to what the developments were and what was being done to manage them. The presidential communication corps should have set up TV interviews, one-on-one sessions with key print editors, the president should have been on national radio consistently. He should have been positioned and viewed as the person taking

centre stage in dealing with the chaos. The president should have positioned himself as the head of the crisis management team to deal with the crisis and all of his overseas engagements should have been cancelled.

### **Use of third parties**

The president should have brought in the Ministers of Safety and Security, National Intelligence, Home Affairs, Defence and Social Services and had them on hand to also speak to the media. This would have positioned the president as being surrounded by a depth of management and it would have gone a long way to show the president and Government were serious about bringing the situation under control.

### **Being open and honest**

A critical component in solving a crisis is being able to accept that you are in a crisis situation. If the president had accepted very early on that there was a crisis and a range of measures had been put in place to deal with it, this would have diffused a lot of the criticism that the Government attracted from a plethora of people, organisations and the media.

### **Communicating far and wide**

Over and above the obvious communication with the media, President Mbeki should have visited the townships and police stations where the refugees initially sought shelter with the various Government ministers. He should have also invited all the ambassadors representing all the various immigrants targeted in the xenophobic attacks for crisis talks to explain to them what was being done to sort out the situation. The South African ambassadors in the various African countries affected by the attacks should have held media briefing sessions with local journalists to talk about the issues at hand.

Investor confidence was also affected. The correct message would have been sent out by Government, showing that it meant business, if it had communicated consistently and dealt firmly and ruthlessly with the violence.

Finally, once it was all over:

### **Initiate a full inquiry into the tragic events**

The Government should have held a full investigation into the events as they unfolded. Public hearings should have been set up with immigrants and township residents to allow them to provide their own opinions. An independent commission of enquiry should have also been established to investigate the origins of the attacks, the actual attacks, how the security services conducted themselves and what Government's failures were and what was expected of them.

The commission could have also spoken to the ambassadors of the various embassies representing the different nationalities targeted in the attacks. The results should have been made public and the recommendations acted on so that measures could be put in place to ensure the crisis never happens again. Having Social Development Minister Zola Skweyiya admitting the attacks were an embarrassment to all South Africans (Radio 702, 17 June 2008, 06:34:18) just does not go far enough.

The critical lesson is to prepare for all eventualities, including those events that are viewed as least likely to occur. Having a robust and enterprise-wide crisis communications plan that could have been rolled out within the golden hour would have helped the Government take control of the situation instead of the situation

running away from Government and out of control. Remember, if you fail to plan then you plan to fail.

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