

No easy fortune

migrant workers in South Africa

The issue of migrants in South Africa is a contentious one. The media, members of the public and even government officials have whipped up a wave of xenophobia and ill-feeling against migrants. They are accused of 'stealing our jobs', 'taking our wives', 'causing crime', 'undermining wage levels', 'dealing in drugs' and 'occupying our homes'. Migrants are referred to by derogatory names like 'aliens' and *makwerkwe*. They are hounded by the police and the Department of Home Affairs. In a number of townships local communities have launched campaigns to 'hunt' them out.

The wave of migrant workers seeking their fortune in South Africa is the result of a variety of factors: the migrant labour system, on which South Africa has long relied to support its mines and other industries; the destabilisation of neighbouring countries by the apartheid regime, socio-economic, ethnic and political instability in many South African countries, South Africa's democratic transition and the relative economic viability of South Africa compared to the rest of the continent. It is not only people from Africa who have moved south; migrants from Europe and the far east, many of whom enjoyed preferential treatment in the past, are major players in a number of sectors of our economy.

Migrant labour

The migrant labour system laid the foundation for the complex problems

A tide of ill-feeling against migrant workers is sweeping South Africa. Busani Selabe paints a picture of the conditions which these workers endure and explodes some myths in the process.

currently facing South Africa. In the 1960s South Africa set up a recruiting agency (Wenela or Wenela-Teba). Through this, workers from Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi (withdrawn in 1977), Namibia, Swaziland and Lesotho were encouraged to come and work in the South African diamond and gold mines.

This system did not begin and end with apartheid. The supply of migrant workers from neighbouring countries is ongoing.

The largest number of migrant workers comes from Mozambique. In 1996, Wenela-Teba recruited 4 000 workers per month from that country. Recruits are deployed to the giant mining houses of South Africa, such as Anglo-American and Goldfields. Sectors allied to mining also employ migrants.

The number of Mozambicans recruited has decreased since 1995, when the figure was 5 500 workers per month. This is due to South African mining houses downscaling their operations. The Director of Teba in

Maputo, Kevin Cotterell, expects the number to drop to around 2 000 per month this year. With an expected upswing in the South African economy by 1998, however, he anticipates an increase to as many as 10 000 workers per month.

Zimbabweans comprised the second largest group of migrants to South Africa. Wenela-Teba recruited in Zimbabwe for labour for farmers in Northern KwaZulu-Natal, Messina and other areas in the Northern Province. Wenela has since ceased its operations in Zimbabwe. It is, however, still bringing in workers from Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana as well as Mozambique.

These workers comprise the *legal* migrants to South Africa. An ever-growing number of *illegal* migrants are, however, also streaming into the country.

While the mineworkers from Mozambique retained strong links with their own country, returning home after each 12 month contract of employment, many Zimbabweans stayed in South Africa once their contracts expired. A large number have settled in South Africa's cities, particularly Johannesburg. They have married South African women, and have children in this country. There are also strong cultural and linguistic links between the two countries.

The same applies to Lesotho. Existing data indicates that the population of Maseru is predominantly female. Men recruited to work on South Africa's mines during the apartheid era are now seeking employment in South African cities.

Destabilisation

People who were once legal migrants have little hope of finding work in their home countries. They prefer to take their chances in South Africa. They have been joined by large numbers of their compatriots who, while they may never have worked legally in this country, hope for better opportunities in

Profile

Most of the migrants from African countries are young men between the ages of 15 and 35. Many Mozambican migrants in the urban areas are the breadwinners of refugee families living in the rural areas of Mpumalanga. It is rare to find women migrants of any nationality in the cities. Those who do live in flatlands, such as Hillbrow, endure harsh living conditions and are constantly exposed to the danger of deportation. During the course of the research, a Palestinian woman was discovered in the cells of Pretoria Central Prison. Her children, aged between three and five, were in the cell with her. The family was later deported.

South Africa than exist in their own country.

South Africa's neighbouring countries have very weak economies. In part, this is due to the destabilising role previously played by South Africa in the region.

Mozambique and Zimbabwe are also suffering the effects of structural adjustment programmes imposed by the IMF. Migrants from Central and West Africa, fleeing civil war and political repression, have joined the stream. Despite popular perceptions, however, this group forms a very small part of the migrant population.

Statistics on the deportation of 'illegal aliens' supplied by the Department of Home Affairs show that South Africa's neighbours provide the largest number of migrants. Eighty-seven percent of the deportees in 1996 were from Mozambique, 8% from Zimbabwe and 2% from Lesotho. A comparison of figures over the years also reveals the growing number of migrants: between 1988 and 1993 there were 96 600 deportations, while the figure for 1996 alone is 180 713.

While some migrants have been integrated into local communities, others endure almost impossible living conditions.



Squatter settlement in Alexandra. Many immigrant families have settled here.

Data collected in the rural border areas of the former Gazankula, Ka-Ngwane and Lebowa homelands around Mpumalanga; Protea North, Protea Glen, Chiawela, Naledi urban townships in Gauteng; and central Johannesburg between 1995 and 1996 gives an insight into the conditions under which migrant workers live.

Housing

In the rural areas, Mozambican migrants have achieved social and economic integration. This is due to the historical, cultural and linguistic ties they share with local Shangaan communities. Many have built their own houses. Through providing services such as building, herding livestock, farming and selling vegetables, they are managing to make a fair living.

Conditions in the cities, where the majority of migrants are from West and Central Africa, are very different. In Johannesburg, Nigerians, Zairians, Ghanaians and Ugandans are renting flats, hotels and rooms in areas such as Hillbrow and

Yeoville. Each room is occupied by between four and eight people. Rentals range from R800 to R1 500 per room. A Ghanaian who lives in a room in Hillbrow says: "I am sharing a room with four of my countrymen. The aim was to protect ourselves against the South Africans because they often come at night in the company of police to raid our flats. They beat us up and threaten to shoot us if we try to defend ourselves and our property. They rob us of our dollars, television sets and radio systems. Sharing a room also helps us to share the cost. Each of us is paying R300 per month to cover the rent of R1 500."

In the townships of Soweto, Alexandra, Mamelodi, Tembisa and Daveyton 60% of the refugees live in garages owned by the locals, while 40% live in squatter camps. Most of those renting garages run informal businesses or work for the owner of the garage in return for accommodation. Rentals average R200 per month. Those who depend on unstable piece jobs opt to erect shacks in the squatter camps.

Jobs

Lack of formal education or qualifications that are not recognised in South Africa affect about 80% of the migrants in the case study. They are therefore confined to the lowest rung of the labour market. Three former Mozambican teachers are working as farmhands in the Mhala district of the former Gazankulu. Two other teachers are working on a building site in Kwa-Ndebele. In Jorrissen street in Braamfontein a Ghanaian man who is a qualified nurse and who was sentenced to death in his home country for opposing the military junta sits on the pavement mending shoes.

The majority of refugees are employed in the security, hotel, retail, farming and construction sectors. A significant number from Zimbabwe and Mozambique are involved in art and craft work. In the city, hawking is a popular occupation. In the townships, migrants sell vegetables, mend shoes and work as mechanics. While these informal activities have the potential to provide stable employment, migrants complain that they are robbed by the police who threaten them with arrest and deportation and ask for bribes under the guise of 'bail'.

Facilities

Migrants in the urban areas do not have access to health or school facilities. They have to go to a private hospital or doctor or go back home for treatment. While those who arrive with letters from their doctors at home do sometimes get treatment at public hospitals, others are turned away. Contract migrant workers, foreign students with study permits and legal immigrants and refugees with refugee status or permits have access to health services.

Migrants are also denied access to South African courts. They have nowhere to turn if their rights are violated. Reporting the matter to the police is a bad idea - the

complainant might well be arrested and deported. A Zairian migrant says that "any time you see a foreigner in court, jail or prison he is not a complainant but rather a victim of the law."

In the rural areas the situation is different. Migrants have access to hospitals and schools. They participate in community structures. However, few dare report a matter to the police or local authority. They have recently elected their own *Indunas* or headman who are taking cases to the local authorities.

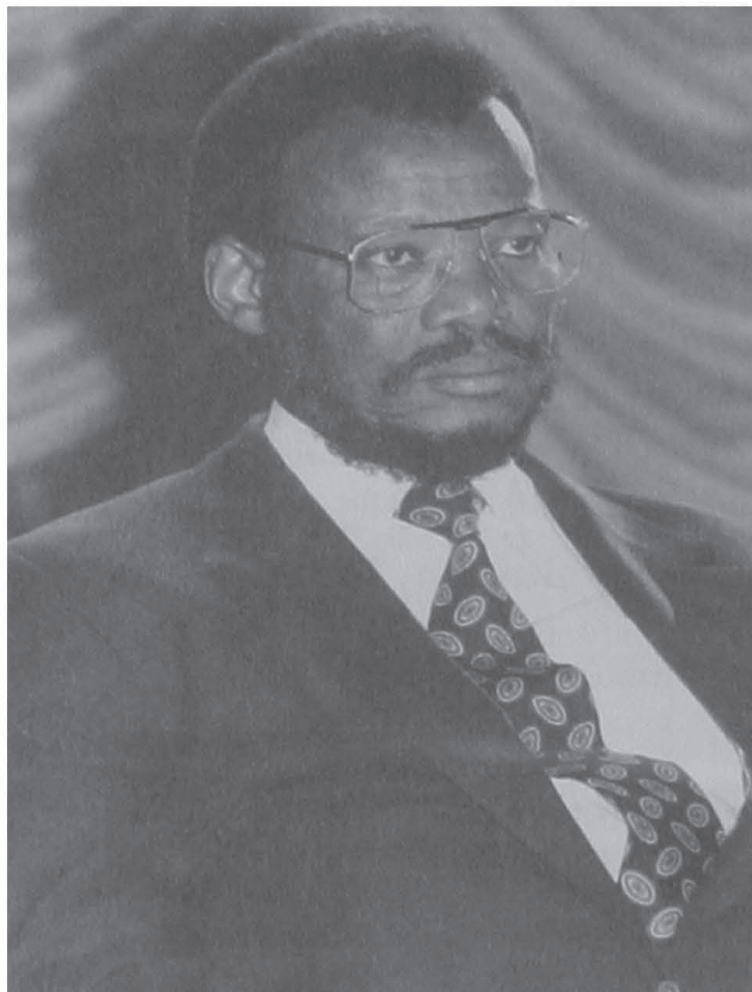
Exploitation

There is no reliable and comprehensive national data on the wages earned by migrant workers. It is not easy to get this information, because many employers, particularly farmers, warn workers not to talk to anyone. A farmworker at a sugar plantation in Nelspruit, Mpumalanga, revealed that talking to a stranger is a punishable offence, which can result in the withdrawal of rations, working without pay, withdrawal of accommodation, assault and even dismissal.

Some commercial farmers pay immigrants only in kind. Cash wages range from R5 to R10 a day to R80 to R150 a month. Many employers also engage in practices which ensure that they do not pay anything at all. In the urban areas employers engage foreigners (mainly Mozambicans) at the beginning of the month, then call the police just before pay day to come and arrest them. Other employers provoke a dispute just before pay day and kick the worker out. Given their illegal status, they have no recourse.

Crime

South Africa is currently experiencing rampant crime levels. Much of the blame has been laid at the door of the migrant community. However, the statistics tell a different story. In 1996, 257 Mozambicans,



Minister of Home Affairs, Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

65 Zimbabweans and 94 migrants from Lesotho were arrested on suspicion of criminal offences. While public perception would have it that the Zairian, Ghanaian and Nigerian migrants are heavily involved in drug dealing, only one person from Zaire and seven from Nigeria were arrested last year.

Towards a solution

The South African government's response thus far has been to reinforce the country's borders, track migrants down through the Internal Tracing Units (ITU) and hold those apprehended in inhumane conditions at the notorious Dyambu Lindela Waiting Facility before dumping them on the borders of their countries. There has even been talk of switching on the electrified fences which the previous regime installed between South Africa and its neighbours.

COSATU takes a different view. At its

International Policy Conference in April 1995 the federation resolved that in order to solve the problem of migrancy, the region needs a co-ordinated strategy. This would mean that:

- ❑ Trade unions in the region should cooperate in seeking regional solutions to problems encountered by migrant workers. This should include working together to force governments to implement the Social Charter and accelerate economic development throughout the region.
- ❑ Steps should be taken to regularise the situation of illegal migrants either through amnesty followed by legalisation, or through assisted voluntary repatriation.
- ❑ Migrant workers should be allowed to renew their contracts within the countries they are contracted to.
- ❑ There should be legal guarantees of equal wages and working conditions for migrant workers.
- ❑ There should be fair and proper control of entry of migrant workers into the host country.
- ❑ Border controls should clearly distinguish between and cater for different categories of people, such as contract migrants, job seekers, tourists etc.

All the while South Africa is seen as an island of wealth in a sea of poverty, migrants will continue to seek their fortunes here. While South Africa must of necessity seek out trading opportunities in Europe, it must also invest in southern Africa in a way that seeks not to denude these countries further of their resources, but to build their economies. Reconstruction and development is not only needed at home: it is eagerly awaited across our borders. ★

Busani Selabe is a researcher at the Wits University Rural Facility Refugee Research Programme.