

'Police stood and watched them loot and destroy'

De Doorns evicts Zimbabweans

In early November South African residents of De Doorns evicted Zimbabweans. **Phumlani Majavu** interviewed ejected Zimbabweans who were spending the festive season in dirty camps.

Over 3 000 Zimbabweans were forced to flee their homes during xenophobic attacks in early November 2009, at Stofland, an informal settlement in De Doorns, 140 km from Cape Town.

According to NGOs such as Passop and Sikhula Sonke, the attacks were caused by 'turf war between labour brokers'. Passop told a local newspaper that 'Labour brokers employ Zimbabweans because they can take a larger cut of what the farmer pays. The whole attack was not instigated by poor South Africans - the frustration was there but it was exploited and instigated by jealous labour brokers who are fighting for business.'

The night before the attacks a community meeting organised by ANC councillor Mpumelelo Lubisi aka Poyi was held. Displaced people, in a temporary safety camp in De Doorns say, it was

here that their fate was decided.

The ringleader, Poyi, they say incited, the attacks by manipulating the community's frustrations. He told them that their problems were caused by foreign nationals who accepted low wages so the solution was to get rid of the Zimbabweans.

Poyi and his ilk, allegedly intimidated the 'foreigners' weeks before the attacks. He told mostly Zimbabweans that they would be sorry if they did not leave De Doorns and 'go back where they came from'.

Zimbabwean Zeno Gombe, one of 1 200 camp residents, is adamant that Poyi stirred up the attacks. The 37-year-old father of four says the councillor went to his shack that he bought for R5 000 from a South African two weeks before the attacks and after humiliating and assaulting him, said, 'I'm going to destroy your house, there is going to be war here if you don't go...'

Two weeks later Gombe and his family were homeless. His shack was 'destroyed'. He lost most of his belongings. 'They even took the zincs,' said the furious Gombe.

They managed to save the clothes they were wearing. 'We are human beings just like them, for a long time we have been their neighbours... So, I can't understand why they would do this to us'

What infuriates him more than anything is that 'the police just stood and watched them loot and destroy our houses' He finally asked police if they were there to help. 'Do you want to save your life or your property?' was the answer he got.

Philip Chinomere, another Zimbabwean lost his belongings but his shack was not destroyed. Its

previous owner, the person he bought it from, is now renting it to others and taking the money.

'We want your government, the people of South Africa to come and see how we live in these camps. Is this how human beings are supposed to live?', said Chinomere.

Gombe and Chinomere agree though that they at least feel safer here than in the informal settlement. This is because there is solidarity amongst the people in the camp.

Chaka Musakwa, chairperson of a committee in the camp, agrees that conditions are appalling. 'There's eight people in one tent, this usually means two families, meaning there's no privacy'

Asked if they are willing to relocate to the informal settlement, as the government expects, some vowed not to go back. 'I'd rather sleep in the streets, under bridges,' says Gombe.

Meanwhile Musakwa is mediating between camp residents and the informal settlement. He believes some people might want to return if 'security measures were in place'.

Chinomere wonders about the 'security measures.' 'The police were there when the whole thing took place, what did they do? They were watching, some were laughing, but they didn't do a single thing to help us... why would they help us now?'

His fury is not misplaced. It's odd the police were caught unawares given that the signs were there. They failed to 'create and secure a safe environment for all people in South Africa' as the Constitution stipulates. LB

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