

South Africa Gets Tough On Illegal Immigrants

In January a young Mozambican man miraculously survived a crocodile attack when he was crossing the appropriately-named Crocodile River. The young Mozambican, like many of his countrymen, was on his way to South Africa to seek security and a better life. He was extremely lucky, a number of other Mozambicans have been killed by wild animals or electrocuted by the high-voltage razor wire which straddles the Mozambique-South Africa border. (Electrical fence has not been used by Nelson Mandela's Government since its election in April 1994.)

Since the discovery of gold and diamonds in the 19th century, South Africa has always attracted immigrants from its neighbours and further afield. From as far as Tanzania and Zaire, young men risked lions and other dangerous animals in order to seek a fortune in *Egoli*, the African name for Johannesburg which means, "city of gold".

The ending of apartheid has, however, increased illegal immigration. And this time the immigrants come from as far as Rwanda, Burundi, Nigeria and Liberia — Africa's current trouble spots. South Africa's immigrants are not only Africans. Chinese, Pakistanis, Russians and Mongolians have also been attracted to *Egoli*.

Authorities estimate that there are about 2 million illegal immigrants in the country. The majority are from Mozambique (about 1,2 million) followed by Zimbabweans whose numbers are estimated at about 30,000. There are also substantial numbers from other southern African countries like Lesotho, Malawi, Zambia, Angola and Botswana. Last year the government deported 90,000 illegal immigrants but the tide is unstemmable.

Mandela's dilemma

The government of President **Nelson Mandela** is split on the issue. Controversial Chief **Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi**, who is the Minister of Home Affairs, is taking a hard line approach. "We need to stand firm to stem the ever increasing influx of

illegal immigration...," he is quoted in the January edition of the magazine, *New African*.

Minister of Defence, **Joe Modise**, proposes deploying troops along the border to deter illegals but opposes the switching on of the electrified fence which was erected by the previous white government to prevent guerrilla infiltration from Mozambique and has since been switched off.

Deputy President, **Thabo Mbeki**, takes a soft line approach reminding black South Africans that illegals come from the same countries which sheltered South African refugees during their time of need. Mbeki says that South Africa needs to extend an economic helping hand to its neighbours in order to solve the problem. For Mandela the dilemma is to prevent illegal immigrants without antagonising South Africa's neighbours.

Popular resentment

Immigrants are resented because they are usually willing to accept lower wages than the locals. They are non-unionized and therefore cheaper to the employers. Buthelezi wants employers who hire illegals to be prosecuted. Immigrants are also being blamed for a host of societal illnesses like the rise in crime, prostitution and drug trafficking.

The group which is widely blamed for the drug trade and fraud are the Nigerians. Many Nigerians reportedly dress well, drive luxury cars and live in the posh suburbs of Johannesburg. In a country where black unemployment is hovering around 50 percent, such display of wealth arouses hostility towards immigrants.

There are genuine political refugees but the general feeling is that the majority are simply economic migrants. Like in Mexico and in USA, the problem of illegal immigrants will be a permanent headache as long as neighbouring countries have different rates of economic development.

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