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Ten years on, SA still has much to do to fight hatred

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THE streets are on fire. Plumes of smoke from burning tyres blacken the sky as people are dragged through the streets. Some are tortured or "necklaced".

Hundreds of innocent men, women and children, with only the clothes on their backs, find shelter in church basements, mosques and synagogues.

These scenes are not from the darkest days of apartheid but the streets of the new South Africa in May 2008.

Just over a decade into our democracy, a wave of xenophobic riots swept across the country, leaving 62 people dead and scores wounded.

Hundreds found themselves homeless, their businesses, possessions and sense of safety destroyed. In an instant, South Africa's dream of a "rainbow nation" had been shattered.

This month marks 10 years since those harrowing events and, to our deep shame, not much has changed. Xenophobic violence has become not only a heart-breaking daily reality, but we have failed to put into practice any of the lessons learned from the tragic events of 2008.

According to the African Centre for Migration and Society, more than 400 immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and those viewed as "outsiders" have been killed in the past decade and more than 100,000 people displaced, with millions of rands of property looted.

In recent years there has been a sharp increase in the severity of violence directed towards those perceived as the "other".

As in 2008, those most affected today are black African foreigners, as well as poor and disenfranchised South Africans living mainly in the townships.

Most of those targeted with hate had fled their home countries in fear for their lives or were desperate to build a better life for their families. They arrived with little more than hope in their hearts, but many brought critical skills, knowledge and a deep-seated motivation to contribute to our society.

While xenophobia is not peculiar to our country, it is especially tragic here, given the history of racism that our people have overcome and the role our fellow Africans played in providing places of exile and support in the fight against apartheid.

In the countless governmental and civil society round tables, symposiums and dialogues that followed in the wake of the 2008 riots, historical, social and economic factors were cited as the underlying causes of xenophobia.

Many of the issues – including the legacy of apartheid policies in the country's structural inequalities and systemic racism, the culture of impunity for those who attack foreigners and the use of ugly rhetoric for political gain – have not only gone unresolved but have worsened.

Although those days were some of democratic South Africa's worst, glimmers of our unique spirit of "ubuntu" shone through the darkness of human suffering. There were countless examples of selflessness, bravery and compassion.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, various faith-based, civil society and non-governmental groups mobilised to provide relief

and rally donations of food and basic necessities for those in shelters and displaced persons camps.

I will never forget the scenes of Doctors Without Borders treating the wounded huddled in the basement of the Central Methodist Church in central Johannesburg, or the scenes of the Red Cross, Gift of the Givers and the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, among others, co-ordinating truckloads of goods to various sites of safety and implementing programmes such as temporary schools to occupy the youngest victims.

This short-term response to assisting those affected was followed by the creation of long-term strategies to understand, address and solve the root causes of the violence.

Just one example of this work, which I was privileged to be a part of, was the creation of the Hate Crimes Working Group (HCWG).

Various NGOs that had worked together in the disaster relief effort felt there was a dire need to address xenophobia and other forms of discrimination.

The HCWG, a multi-sectoral network of non-governmental organisations set up to spearhead advocacy against hate-crimes, is just one of many initiatives that continue to work tirelessly to assist victims of hate.

Hate crime

Programmes and campaigns that foster inclusion and build bridges between communities, such as the South African Jewish Board of Deputies' Make Us Count Election Observer team – which comprises members of the Jewish community with locals of other faiths and foreigners who want to give back to the country's democratic process – do important work. The scope for expanding these projects is vast.

Ten years on and there is much work to be done to tackle discrimination in our society. One essential step is to recognise xenophobia, as well as other crimes of prejudice such as homophobia and anti-semitism, as hate crimes.

Hate crimes are motivated by bias and target victims based on their perceived membership of a certain social group. They are message crimes that take a psychological toll on the entire community to which the victim belongs and often happen in an environment in which discrimination against particular groups is socially accepted.

Only by acknowledging these acts as hate crimes and putting in place the appropriate legislation can we adequately record and police hate crimes, improve the judicial response and better monitor them.

The time has come for all those who live in our country to push our leaders to act on these crucial issues and ensure that the spirit of our progressive constitution, and the values enshrined in the Freedom Charter and the human rights foundation of our country are put into practice.

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