

29 April, 2015

Statement by The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) denouncing xenophobia-related violence and urging violence preventative and therapeutic interventions



In recent months, the country has experienced gruesome incidents of xenophobia-related violence. Some South Africans attacked, injured and killed a number of non-nationals and South Africans. Businesses belonging to non-nationals were looted and burned. People were driven out of their homes and had to spend time in refugee tent camps. The scenes reported in the media and broadcast on local and global television networks have been horrific, reminiscent of similarly terrible incidents that occurred in 2008.

PsySSA adds its voice to the many other individuals, institutions, and organisations in denouncing the xenophobia-related crime and violence. The Society beseeches all peace-loving South Africans to stand against the violence and related abuses of human rights. In these times of great trauma and distress we also advise contemplation and empathy.

PsySSA acknowledges government efforts to support those affected by the crime and violence. We note government responses in sending in the army to deal with the eruption of violent xenophobia and the promises to stop violence. In light of previous experience and persistently high levels of trauma in the country however, government action has been less than ideal. Sustainable interventions regarding xenophobia-related violence and hate crimes, in general, are required.

The Society understands that determinants and pathways of violent xenophobia are likely to be complex. However, whatever causes may underlie the violent xenophobia, violence is a psychologically and socially unhealthy response. In addition, assaults, murders, and lootings do not affect only people's physical well-being and economic livelihoods. They also have enduring psychosocial effects, destabilising families, and rendering communities vulnerable.

PsySSA urges government, other state organs, and business to invest in scientific studies to generate evidence on the causes and consequences of violence and xenophobia and hate crimes, in general. We encourage the state, parastatals, civil society and communities to actively support violence and xenophobia prevention and reduction interventions. It is also important that all concerned recognize that these are prejudice-motivated crimes.

We recommend trauma-related psycho-social counselling and therapy for both survivors and perpetrators of violence generally, and violent xenophobia in particular. PsySSA further calls on its membership and all psychologists and counsellors working in South Africa to avail their expertise to support those affected by the events in the country.