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OPINION

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South Africa Is a Warning

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This essay is part of [The Great Migration], a series by Lydia Polgreen exploring how people are moving around the world today.

When people in the rich world imagine a migrant from the poor world, I suspect the image conjured is that of a desperately impoverished person with no marketable skills who will travel any distance and brave any risk to grab an unearned fistful of Western wealth.

But the truth is that a migrant is much more likely to look like a man I met last year named Fikre Gebrie Orebo. Growing up in a fertile but deeply impoverished southern region of Ethiopia, he had dreamed of attending a university to become an engineer. But he was the firstborn son, and his family depended on him to start working immediately. And so he hit the road, leaving his hometown and heading to the capital, Addis Ababa. He found work as a laborer, digging foundations by hand and moving stones on construction sites.

It didn't take long for him to realize he'd need to keep moving. The brutal work paid little, and there were few opportunities for young men like him. The government was dominated by a northern ethnic elite that shunned his southern tribe. The last straw came when the government started rounding up young men to send them to fight an ill-advised war with Eritrea. Orebo feared that southerners like him would be used as cannon fodder in a pointless conflict.

But when he finally set off on his cross-border journey, he didn't head north, toward Europe, or try to somehow get to the distant, prosperous lands of North America, where hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians have settled. He set his sights on Kenya, his country's neighbor to the south, where he found a job in a cafe, then farther south still, to South Africa, sub-Saharan Africa's biggest economy, where he had heard that an enterprising young person could make a prosperous life.

There, he told me, he was granted asylum as a member of a persecuted minority, and he ultimately settled in Heidelberg, a town about an hour's drive southeast of Johannesburg. Finally, his dreams came to life. He built a successful business, a pair of convenience stores, known locally as spaza shops, in the nearby Black township of Ratanda. He married a young South African woman, and they are raising their children in a comfortable, suburban-style home. He has long sent money home to Ethiopia, supporting his siblings while they were in school and helping to build a house for his father, who had been a farmer, to enjoy a comfortable retirement.

Orebo's story illustrates an important but often occluded fact in this age of migration. Despite the panic in rich countries over the arrival of people fleeing poor, war-tossed nations, most people from the global south who migrate don't head north. The majority who flee in haste end up quite near where they came from, hoping to go home as soon as possible. And even those who migrate farther afield — searching for work, fleeing political persecution or simply wanting a new life — tend to remain in their own region or continent. In our hyperconnected, jet-powered age, the median distance traveled by modern migrants is less than 400 miles.

This pattern has been repeated across the globe in the biggest crises of our time. The 2015 surge of Syrian refugees that remade European politics was a small fraction of the total number of Syrians forced to flee; a vast majority ended up in neighboring countries, with Turkey alone playing uncomfortable host to some three million people, roughly three times the number taken in by the European Union.

More than seven million Venezuelans have fled their country's long-running political and economic crisis. President Trump's recent spat with the president of Colombia over deporting Colombian migrants looks quite different when you consider that Colombia, a country of some 50 million people, with a per capita G.D.P. of less than a tenth that of the United States, has taken in about four times as many Venezuelans as America. Indeed, 85 percent of Venezuelan refugees and migrants have remained in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Perhaps the most urgent refugee crisis in the world right now, one of the largest since the partition of India in 1947, was set off by the civil war in Sudan, which has forced some 14 million people to flee their homes. Most of Sudan's refugees have fled into often troubled bordering nations: Chad, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Egypt, Libya and Ethiopia. Vanishingly few have managed to reach Europe or North America.

Sudan is just the latest of the many long-simmering refugee crises in Africa. Decades of turmoil in Somalia, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe and more have produced floods of refugees. Sub-Saharan Africa leads the world in the number of forcibly displaced people, with about 45 million on the move, more than doubling since 2017. But an estimated 96 percent of those people remain within the continent.

While governments across the global north panic over a relative trickle of migrants, a very real migration crisis is unfolding in the global south. And as wealthy countries in the global north raise their fences ever higher and outsource their border control to countries beyond their frontiers while slashing development aid to the poorest nations, the pressure on migrant destinations in the global south is ratcheting up — sparking violence, xenophobia and instability. By closing their borders to the relatively small numbers of migrants who make the crossing, rich countries risk destabilizing some of the most important nations for regional stability across the globe. That danger is abundantly clear in South Africa, where a country long home to migrants has now turned against them, with devastating effect. For other magnet countries in the global south facing great flows of migrants fleeing war, poverty and the degradation of their land by climate change, South Africa is a potent cautionary tale. And for the rest of the world, it's a warning.

Mr. Orebo outside one of his closed shops. Credit...Lindokuhle Sobekwa for The New York Times

When I went to South Africa on the eve of its national elections last May, I found unease. The vote came 30 years after the end of apartheid, but the mood was anything but celebratory. Bitter and disappointed by the failure to achieve broad prosperity for Black citizens, political opportunists have redirected resentment from white residents, who still hold much of the country's land and wealth, and refashioned it into an often violent antipathy toward African migrants who have flocked to South Africa, the continent's wealthiest nation.

Xenophobia in South Africa is not new, but the issue gained political significance in last year's elections. Since 1994, the African National Congress has held large majorities, a virtual hammerlock on electoral politics with a broad-church approach that papered over many of the cleavages within the country's diverse population. But its support has been steadily slipping, and the fault lines within its coalition have taken on predictable if tragic forms: stoking ethnic divisions and scapegoating of foreigners.

"Dissenting politics, arising from the sort of poverty, unemployment and deep problems that we have in our society, will not necessarily produce progressive politics," Noor Nieftagodien, a professor at the University of the Witwatersrand, told me. "Xenophobia is an important expression of the kind of regressive politics that can be produced under those circumstances."

To understand how those politics were playing out ahead of the vote, I went to Ratanda, where Orebo had made his modest fortune. He had been living in South Africa for about 18 years. From the moment he arrived, he felt a sense of optimism and possibility, completely different from the torpor and political conflict gripping his homeland. He quickly found work, selling goods in a market in the center of Johannesburg, then saving up enough money to start a shop of his own in Ratanda.

He told me that he had a great life in South Africa, even if there were problems along the way. Running a cash business in a poor township wasn't easy. He had been robbed at gunpoint a number of times, but he took these incidents in stride.

"In South Africa, this robbery thing is normal," he told me. "We don't mind once the robbery comes. You only take what we sell on that day. But the following day, we will start again. So it was not a problem."

Orebo arrived in South Africa in 2006, a time when the economy was in the midst of a postapartheid boom and the governing African National Congress saw the country as a beacon for Africa, opening its doors to people across the continent who sought safety and opportunity. "South Africa belongs to all who live in it," the preamble to South Africa's Constitution boldly declares, while avoiding the word "citizens."

The A.N.C. had long embraced a Pan-African ethos, advocating much freer movement across the continent, arguing that antiquated barriers to trade and

migration were a colonial hangover. “South Africa cannot be an island of prosperity in a sea of poverty” was a popular refrain in the party, often attributed to Nelson Mandela. Why, the party asked, should the most talented Africans go to Europe or America when there was so much potential waiting to be tapped so much closer to home?

South Africa certainly had abundance. There were seemingly endless tracts of fertile farmland; rich seams of precious gold, diamonds and platinum; gorgeous landscapes to draw tourists from across the globe; and high-quality infrastructure to move people and goods easily within the country and beyond its borders.

But the terms of the settlement that ended apartheid sowed the seeds of xenophobia in ways that, looking back, are painfully obvious. Black South Africans gained political power and freedom of movement. But despite the American right-wing fantasies fueled by Trump and Elon Musk of a persecuted white minority being chased off their land and stripped of their wealth, most of the country’s riches remained stubbornly held by the white minority.

This was the price of a peaceful transition: an agreement to transfer political power without broadly redistributing wealth. A handful of politically connected Black elites, people like the country’s current president, Cyril Ramaphosa, who had played a critical role in ending apartheid as the leader of a mineworkers’ union, had been dealt into the upper reaches of the economy, becoming fabulously wealthy.

Just about everyone else was left behind. When the World Inequality Lab examined South Africa’s economy in 2021, it found that despite the country’s political transformation, “there is no evidence that wealth inequality has decreased since the end of apartheid.” The wealthiest 10 percent own more than 85 percent of the country’s household wealth, it found. About a third of the work force is unemployed.

South Africa had long been a magnet for workers across southern Africa when Robert Mugabe’s seizure of white-owned farms plunged Zimbabwe into free fall, sending more than a million people across the border not long before the postapartheid boom started to fade. Horrific acts of violence targeting African migrants became commonplace, with widespread riots breaking out in 2008 and 2015.

The mobs would sometimes interrogate suspected foreigners, asking if they knew the isiZulu word for “elbow.” Spaza shop owners, in particular, were frequent targets, including those from Somalia. Many had very dark skin and striking aquiline features that made it impossible to pass for locals, and their work in townships made them sitting ducks for xenophobic violence.

An attack on a foreign-owned shop in the township of Thokoza, South Africa, not far from Ratanda, in 2013. Credit...Lindokuhle Sobekwa

Maybe he was just lucky, but Orebo told me he had not faced such prejudice. There was some rioting in Ratanda 2012, when his and other foreigners’ shops were looted. They closed their shops for a few days, but otherwise he felt welcome in the community. He married a local woman, and their three children were South African citizens. His business thrived, and he told me with pride that at one point he had three cars.

Spaza shops, where residents buy small daily household items like food, toiletries and cigarettes, have long been a battleground in the wars between South Africans and outsiders. Migrant groups, especially those from Somalia and Ethiopia, have thrived in this niche, giving rise to resentment from locals. After years of dodging such violence, Orebo ran out of luck in the fall of 2023.

A mob of anti-migrant activists — including, I was told, supporters of a group known as Operation Dudula — swarmed the township, blocking streets with flaming tires. They burned and looted shops owned by foreigners, including Orebo’s. He went to the township later that night to survey the damage and salvage what he could but was confronted by armed men.

“They came with a gun, and they shot at me,” Orebo told me. “But God saved me.”

Orebo is merely the latest in a centuries-long line of migrants who have made the country we now know as South Africa, which has seen wave upon wave of migration, with each shaping its culture, politics and language in profound ways. About 1,700 years ago, Bantu people from West and Central Africa migrated south, bringing farming and other innovations to lands that had been home to the nomadic Khoekhoe and San communities. Explorers from Europe arrived in the 15th century, followed by waves of white settlers, mostly from the Netherlands, France, Germany and Britain. Thousands of enslaved people, stolen from East Africa and Asia, were forced to labor there.

The discovery of diamonds and gold in the 19th century transformed South Africa into a powerful magnet, drawing fortune hunters from Europe, the United States and Australia. The mines created many dangerous and difficult jobs that needed filling, and decades before the formal imposition of apartheid, the government of South Africa created a complex system of recruitment and exploitation of Black African workers from across southern Africa. Unlike white migrants, who were permitted to settle permanently in South Africa, Black Africans who worked in mines could stay only as long as their employers permitted.

Later, it became the explicit policy of the apartheid state to rely on foreign workers from around the region rather than Black South Africans, who were denied full citizenship rights, forced off their land and herded into areas that white people didn't want, so-called homelands based on tribal and linguistic identities. The prime land freed up by this forced migration of millions of people was sold cheaply to white settlers — a source of profound economic inequality that has endured.

The end of apartheid was supposed to lift Black South Africans and give them a share of the country's bounty. But when that failed to happen, migrants were an easy scapegoat.

"There is a long history of the South African elite, largely the white elite, using immigrant labor as a way of undermining Black South African power," Loren Landau, a leading scholar of migration in South Africa, told me. If antimigrant populists in rich countries are promising a return to a supposedly better past, South Africa's populists are playing a different game. Agitation against migrants, he said, was a misplaced attempt "to find a way of reclaiming this promised future" of a postapartheid South Africa that never materialized.

In Ratanda these politics were playing out with deadly and mysterious violence. I visited the family of Veli Ntombela, a supporter of Operation Dudula who had opened his own spaza shop after many of the migrant shop owners were pushed out of the township. A few weeks earlier, someone approached the small store attached to Ntombela's tidy concrete block house and asked to buy cigarettes.

He was running low, so he asked his partner, Sibongile Miya, to go back into the house to fetch some more. Moments later, she heard a series of sharp cracks, at first not recognizing the sound as gunfire. She raced back into the shop, where she found Ntombela lying there, bleeding. She fell to the ground in shock. Later that evening he was declared dead from his wounds.

Ntombela's was the latest in a series of unsolved killings involving South Africans who had set up spaza shops after the expulsion of foreigners. Ratanda was abuzz with theories about the shootings. The foreign shopkeepers, I was told, were migrants from Pakistan and members of Islamic extremist groups, to boot. No, others said, they came from Somalia and were affiliated with Al Shabab, a militant group. Some thought that foreigners had hired hit men from neighboring Lesotho to kill upstart shopkeepers like Ntombela in the hopes of reclaiming their businesses.

As these rumors circulated, Election Day was fast approaching. Utility poles were festooned with signs from Operation Dudula, which had transformed itself into an upstart regional political party. "Mass deportation of all illegal immigrants," one read, featuring a picture of the party's leader in camouflage fatigues. "Our economy. Our heritage."

The party traces its origins to a vigilante group formed in 2021 in Soweto, the fabled township at the heart of the struggle against apartheid. Dudula is an isiZulu word that means to "force out" or "knock down," and the group has repeatedly been accused of targeting and harassing foreigners.

Ntombela, who was 39, was a prominent supporter of the party. Tall with a chiseled physique, he had worked on the fringes of South Africa's movie industry as a stuntman and actor. His relatives proudly showed me a photograph of him, smiling and shirtless, wearing a loincloth on the set of a 2013 film based on Nelson Mandela's autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom," starring Idris Elba.

Ntombela's family, like a lot of Black South Africans, had been supporters of the A.N.C., but worries about crime and migration pulled them away from the party in recent years — first toward a party linked to messianic churches that promised to restore the death penalty and restrict foreign ownership of businesses and ultimately to the even more hard-line Operation Dudula.

As a new party, Operation Dudula didn't get very far in the elections, winning less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the vote. But xenophobia was a crucial wedge issue driving voters from the A.N.C. to political parties like the breakaway uMkhonto weSizweand the Patriotic Alliance, both of which promised harsh border controls. Their success underscored the country's hardened attitude to migrants and outsiders.

Mr. Orebo in Ratanda, near one of his closed shops. Credit...Lindokuhle Sobekwa for The New York Times

Orebo, for his part, was forgiving. He said he understood why South Africans might resent foreigners who find success in the country, given how many young people struggle to eke out a living. "To be honest, South Africans, they're very good people," he said. "South Africans, they have a right to cry, because they overloaded this country. Every border gate is open."

He has sent word back to Ethiopia, though, warning young people tempted to make the dangerous overland journey that it isn't worth it. Better to set your sights elsewhere, he advises any young person who asks. Since the attack on his shops, he has not been able to reopen and has been surviving by selling off what he can — the three cars are long gone — and doing odd jobs.

“I’m really struggling,” he told me. For the first time since he went to South Africa, he’s been thinking he may need to migrate once again, perhaps to Canada or the United States. “Really, I give up,” he said. “If I get any chance to go from this country, wherever I can go. Because here, now, I’m hopeless.”

https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/18/opinion/south-africa-migration.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare

Lydia does an excellent job surveying a region and topic I know fairly well. The last time I was in Cape Town, a dozen years ago, the city was swarming with “illegals” all trying to scratch out a living either based in an informal settlement or camped out on the side of Table Mountain. They came from West Africa (Senegal, Nigeria) as much as East Africa and southern Africa, hustlers one and all. The lazy and dull do not leave hearth and home to cross an enormous continent. The vast majority were honest, well-intentioned, remarkable people who put me to shame, but inevitably a thieving minority made life quite insecure. I was told the “real” criminals (the carjackers, the B & E guys, were all “professionals”, typically Native South Africans with history in criminality back to, if not apartheid, then the decay and chaos of the days afterwards. The gangs of the Eastern Cape and the Cape Flats certainly do.

I would have loved to settle teaching English to these immigrants hungry to get better English to get better jobs. But no one and no agency had any intention of helping these people, or be seen trying. The Cape Town Library downtown ran a little informal ESL class with a volunteer teacher with a faithful class of street traders taking an hour off. The message rather was you are not welcome so go home. Leave our jobs and women and husbands alone.

As “illegal aliens” they experience in spades all the insecurities of immigrants feeling vulnerable. Employers love them because they are docile, uncomplaining, and ever-willing to comply. Many, such as the Zimbabweans before Mugabe’s kind crashed the country, were typically better educated thanks to all the Canadian teachers who had come to Zim after liberation. Native South Africans who perhaps had thought the end of apartheid would bring in ease and preference for local Blacks resented this competition.

Lydia rightly points out how the mines constructed an economy exploiting African to the North, sensing weakness beyond that of the oppressed Native Black tribes, urban and rural. The Northern border has always been an “unnatural” imposition. Boundaries and nation states remain an unhelpful relic of colonialism. And Africa, so huge, is too diverse with life pervasively too hardscrabble to support much Pan-African identity and solidarity. TJB