

## **No Camp for Brothers: African Philanthropy's Silence Around Xenophobia** **By Tanatsiwa Dambuza**

*When war comes, the world builds camps. When floods come, donors mobilize. When xenophobia burns a man's shop in Johannesburg, he vanishes into nothing. There is no camp. There is no fund. There is no number to call.*

On a Sunday morning in late May, a single bus pulled into the border post here, carrying seventy-four people who had fled for their lives. They were Zimbabweans, men, women, and children, [evacuated from Mossel Bay in South Africa's Western Cape after a wave of anti-immigrant attacks](#). They arrived with what they could carry. The state met them with an assessment, some food, and a promise of transport to wherever in the country they still had a home.

The bus is the visible part of the story. What happens after it uncovers the part nobody plans for?

South Africa is gripped by another surge of xenophobic violence. In May 2026, [Human Rights Watch warned of a new wave of attacks](#) as anti-immigration movements intensified protests and vigilante actions in Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Durban. The pattern is familiar and grim. In one Durban incident, a Cameroonian shop owner who had lived in South Africa for nearly twenty years had his door broken down by a mob. The targets are the same as always: the migrant trader, the foreign tenant, the African from somewhere else.

Zimbabweans bear much of the violence because they make up a large share of the population. [Some millions of Zimbabweans are thought to have moved south](#) over the years of economic collapse, forming the largest single national group in a foreign population, which has been counted anywhere between one and several million.

This is not new. In 2015, after attacks that began in Durban, [more than 2,000 Zimbabweans packed their bags for home](#). They were processed at a camp hastily set up at Beitbridge, in groups of hundreds, [including women and children who had watched their fathers beaten and their homes looted](#). Once the buses stopped arriving, the camp shut down, although the need did not ease.

Herein lies the center of this story. When a person flees a war, there is a global machinery to catch them. There are refugee camps, mandated agencies, international funding streams, and a legal category with attached rights. When a person flees xenophobia, none of that exists. They are not refugees in the legal sense; they are citizens of a neighboring state, going home. They fall outside the frameworks built for the displaced and into a space with no name and no budget. There is no camp for survivors of xenophobia. There is no standing fund. For most of them, there is no one to call.

Many Zimbabweans in South Africa are caught between two punishments. [Citizens Watch Zimbabwe has warned](#) that returnees face customs duties and import charges on the belongings and assets they accumulated in the years abroad. So, the family fleeing violence in Johannesburg can arrive at Beitbridge to be billed for bringing home the fridge and the bed they bought with their wages. Insecurity on one side of the river and a customs charge on the other. For many, the calculation is to stay and risk the mob, because returning home has become too expensive.

What fills that space, when anything fills it, is the quiet, unfunded work of ordinary people.

Tendai is a pastor whose small church sits within sight of the Beitbridge border. He asked that his congregation not be named. For more than a decade, he says, the church has done the same thing whenever violence flares across the river. It meets the returnees the state does not, finds them a place to sleep, feeds them from what the congregation can spare, and pays the kombi fare to send them to relatives upcountry.

"They come with nothing," he says. "Sometimes the shoes only. We pray with them, we feed them, and we find them a bed. Then we ask where their people are, and we put them on the bus. We have never had a budget for this. We have never asked for one. It is what you do when your brother is at the door."

The phrase recurs in almost every conversation here. Your brother. Not your countryman, not your beneficiary, not your case file. The man getting off the bus is treated as kin, and the help is offered in the register of family rather

than charity. It is the logic of Ubuntu, the southern African idea that a person is a person through other people, and it does the work that no formal system has been built to do.

For some, there is no brother left to welcome them. A person who left twenty years ago, building a life and a family in Johannesburg or Cape Town, may return to a country that has moved on without them. The parents who would have taken them in are buried, the siblings have scattered, and a cousin who barely remembers their face now lives in the rural home. They are home, sure, but they are strangers.

Memory, who runs a small community organization in Harare that has absorbed a handful of returnee families, has repeatedly seen it.

“We had a man last year; he had been in South Africa since he was nineteen,” she says. “He came back at forty. His mother had died, the stand was taken, and the brothers said there was no room. Where does that man go? He is Zimbabwean on paper and a foreigner in his own home. We found him a room. Nobody funds that room. We beg for it every month.”

The psychological wound is as real as the logistical one and even less attended to. To lose a home and a business in an afternoon, to be chased from a place you called home for two decades, is a trauma. There is counseling for refugees. There is, in practice, almost none for the man who fled Mossel Bay last week. The state’s promise of psychosocial support, repeated in every repatriation announcement, rarely survives the journey from the border to the village.

Why does the philanthropic sector not see this situation? The honest answer is structural. International humanitarian funding is allocated according to recognized categories: refugees, internally displaced persons, and victims of declared disasters. Xenophobia produces none of these cleanly. Its victims are returning citizens, not refugees. The violence is not a natural disaster. The numbers, a busload here, a few hundred there, never reach the threshold that triggers a major appeal. And the politics are uncomfortable enough that institutions on all sides prefer to look away.

“A development-finance specialist who has worked across the region and who asked not to be named because of ongoing work with regional bodies put it bluntly. “The African philanthropic and policy world talks constantly of solidarity and Ubuntu,” she said “yet has built no instrument to honour either when one African country’s citizens are attacking another’s.” The African Union’s own commission has condemned the attacks as a betrayal of [the principles of African solidarity enshrined in the African Charter](#). But condemnation is not infrastructure. There is no continental fund a returnee can draw on, no standing reception system beyond what the International Organization for Migration improvises, no pan-African philanthropy that treats xenophobia as the recurring emergency it is.

But the questions press harder than any funding line. Where is the brotherhood the region once spoke of? Where is the sisterhood? Where is Ubuntu, the belief that a person is a person through other people, when a man who has lived in Durban for twenty years is dragged from his shop because he was born on the wrong side of a river?

The river is the point. The Limpopo that divides Zimbabwe from South Africa is not an ancient line between ancient enemies. It is a colonial invention, one of the thousands of borders imposed across Africa in the scramble that the Berlin Conference of 1884 and 1885 set in motion, when the continent was parcelled out by Europeans who had never walked it. The line was drawn straight through people who were one. The Ndebele of southern Zimbabwe originated from Nguni groups who migrated north from the Zulu heartland (now KwaZulu Natal in South Africa) in the nineteenth century, making them kin to the very people who today call them foreigners. The Venda live on both banks of the Limpopo, holding Zimbabwean and South African passports, yet they remain one people by blood. The border that now decides who belongs was never drawn by the people it divides.

Recent history is even more painful. Within living memory, these were the Frontline States, the southern African nations that stood together against white minority rule. Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Botswana, Tanzania and Angola sheltered the fighters of the region’s liberation; hid them, fed them, buried their dead, and absorbed the cross-border raids of the apartheid army for doing so. Many of the men and women who freed South Africa were once exiled themselves, taken in by the neighbours whose children are now chased through the streets of Johannesburg. The brotherhood was real. The questions these violence brings up is where that brotherhood went, and why the united front that survived the Mfecane, the Berlin Conference and the apartheid wars could not survive the arrival of peace.

That improvisation is real and worth honouring. The IOM has long-run reception centres at Beitbridge and Plumtree that have, over the years, [assisted hundreds of thousands of returnees with shelter, food, medical care, and family tracing](#). Churches do what Tendai's does. Community organisations do what Memory's does. Diaspora groups wire money south to support a relative and then north to resettle them. Researchers have begun to name this last reflex: a 2025 study describes [cross-border philanthropy as a coping strategy for xenophobia](#), a way for the diaspora to hold on to a sense of belonging in a homeland they may one day be forced back to. But all of it is reactive, scattered, and chronically short of money, switched on when the buses come and starved between waves.

Back at Beitbridge, the bus from Mossel Bay has long since unloaded. Tendai's church took in three of the seventy-four. The rest dispersed into the country, to brothers who had room and to brothers who did not return; to villages that remembered them and to those that did not. By the following week, the border will be quiet again until the next wave across the river sends the next busload home.

"We are Africans," Tendai says when asked why his church keeps doing this work with no help and no thanks. "The border between us was not drawn by us. When my brother is beaten in Johannesburg and comes to my door in Beitbridge, I cannot ask him for papers. I can only let him in."

The question this story leaves is not whether ordinary Zimbabweans will keep opening their doors. They will. It is whether the formal world of African philanthropy, so fluent in the language of brotherhood, will ever build something that stands behind them when they do.