



OUR OPINION

No place for xenophobia

THE shocking xenophobic attacks in South Africa in May 2008, which reportedly left over 60 dead and thousands displaced, stunned the world and led to much necessary introspection and academic discourse around xenophobia, violence and citizenship.

How had a country once held up as an international example of racial reconciliation come to this? How could we so viciously turn on people from the very same African countries that had hosted our freedom fighters?

After much navel gazing, many conclusions were reached. The Human Sciences Research Council spoke about the underlying causes including crime, migration, corruption, job scarcity, housing and small business competition. One thing seemed certain. It should never be allowed to happen again and steps were supposed to be put in place to ensure it never did.

Local councillors – who extorted and scapegoated foreigners – were identified as a big problem and the HSRC emphasised the need for them to be reined in and educated.

But it seems we in the Eastern Cape learnt nothing from that horror period in our history. There have been alarming reports of our leadership sanctioning community imposed restrictions on foreign-owned businesses and of bad-mouthing foreigners in the most appalling terms.

Last month Bhisho endorsed a decision by the Nompumelelo township residents in East London to limit the number of Somali-owned shops that could operate there.

Local government MEC Mlibo Qoboshiyane was supposed to investigate complaints from Somali nationals that a councillor was refusing them licences to open spaza shops unless they bribed him. But the bizarre conclusion reached was that the community-imposed limit on foreign owned shops was justified and would be enforced.

Even worse, one month later, we hear of the Southernwood ward committee setting forth to close down unlicensed foreign-owned spaza shops.

One cannot fault police or councillors who apply the law and who act lawfully to shut down unlicensed traders. But, singling out legal residents of this country on the grounds of their ethnicity is appalling. So too is the inflammatory rhetoric that accompanied the exercise.

One ward committee member announced that these foreign shop owners sold drugs and stole local children for prostitution and had to be stopped. Councillor Sandla Manciya declared “these people” were causing the value of property to plunge in the area.

How awful that we have learnt so little. We had our Kristallnacht in 2008. Let’s not repeat it.