

ALEXANDRA RENEWAL PROJECT

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

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Social dynamics and housing allocations in Alexandra mid-2008 update

In previous reports the ARP has defined a number of cleavages within the broader society. While the issues of international migration had been noted, in May 2008 a new social dynamic hit Alexandra in the form of xenophobic attacks. It is important to stress that whilst Alex was seen as the epicenter of the xenophobia, in fact violence against immigrants had been reported for some months before this in Tshwane (Pretoria) and from areas of the Western Cape as long ago as mid-2006.

The violence that erupted locally was intense and concentrated in the so-called 'Beirut' area of Alexandra. An area that during the height of the political violence that was the precursor to the 1994 democratic elections experienced massive population dislocations as people either fled from or sought refuge in the area depending on affiliation.

Despite huge provocation and direct threats the violence never spread beyond the area where it started except into the new Extension 7 "RDP" housing project. Not a single shack or house was burnt or attacked outside of the defined area of Beirut and Ext 7. Although this must not be seen as undermining the very real fear of attack that people experienced.

Within Extension 7 the objective of the mob attacks was not clear. Historically there have always been groupings within Alexandra who have claimed the right to allocate houses to their members through invasions in contradiction to the social compacts negotiated between the ARP and its community and political stakeholders. Given the number of South Africans displaced it appears to have more to do with house invasion than with any genuine grievance related to foreigners.

The attacks did, however, bring into Alex a new social dynamic by "de-integrating" a group of residents who are now referred to as "foreigners". While there are no official statistics at hand, best estimates are that 15% of the residents of Alexandra are in fact not born in South Africa. This means an estimated 60 000 people living in Alexandra, many of them long-term residents with roots in the community with locally-born spouses and children, are now so-called "foreigners". Given that approximately 1 000 people in Alex were displaced by the recent violence or the threat of violence it is clear that non-South African born people remain part and parcel of the social fabric. It is also important to note that some ¾ of the displaced people have returned back to the community except back to the Beirut area.

In May 2001, President Thabo Mbeki writing in the on-line journal ANC Today said the following:

"... we must continue to be vigilant against any evidence of xenophobia against the African immigrants. It is fundamentally wrong and unacceptable that we should treat people who come to us as friends as though they are our enemies ... To express the critical importance of Africa to ourselves, both black and white, we should say that we are either African or we are nothing."

This statement was made with apparent reference to a spate of attacks on foreigners living in South Africa, prompted by what appeared to be high levels of negativity towards and resentment of foreigners, otherwise labelled as xenophobia. Historically, the word 'xenophobia' means 'fear of the unknown', but in our modern context, it is defined as the 'morbid dislike of foreigners'.

Source:

Xenophobia a deep rooted phenomena

By Vincent Williams, 21-05-2008

<http://www.amandlapublishers.co.za/content/view/676/73/>

These numbers are not mentioned in an attempt to downplay the seriousness of the situation but rather, together with the following undramatised account of the events in Alexandra, to assist in conceptualizing the consequences of the violence:

Allocations

A group of people stormed into the residential area known as Extension 7, which is a housing project on the Alexandra East Bank consisting of 1400 RDP (give-away) units. The houses were allocated to Alex residents who had been obliged to relocate to make way for new developments undertaken by the Alexandra Renewal Project in their respective areas. The majority of people allocated housing were displaced by road construction, the upgrading of school grounds, or from shacks on the site of a new bridge being built across the Jukskei River. Others have had to move to make way for the installation of sewers and other infrastructure.

All houses in Ext. 7 were under threat but were protected by a combination of security forces, including the South African Police Services, the Johannesburg Metropolitan Police Department and private security companies. Unfortunately 36 households were forcibly evicted by the mob. The South African Police Services have since conducted raids on the affected properties, evicted all illegal occupants and made arrests. A few houses remain empty and will be protected until the return of their legally allocated occupants. It is important to note that only 9 of the 36 houses invaded during the violence were allocated to non-South-African-born residents. But why were they given houses at all?

In dealing with the issue of relocations and housing allocation the ARP is bound by the housing code. In this regard chapter 12 of the code is relevant:

National Housing Program: Housing Assistance in Emergency Circumstances

A] 12.3 Application of the Program:

12.3.1 Definition of Emergency Housing Circumstances

This Program will apply to emergency situations of exceptional housing need, such situations being referred to as "Emergencies", as defined below:

- ***live in the way of engineering services or proposed services such as those for water, sewerage, power, roads or railways, or in reserves established for any such purposes and who require emergency assistance;***

B] 12.2.2 Principles of the Program

- *Assistance under this Programme should wherever possible represent an initial phase towards a permanent housing solution.*

In terms of chapter 2 of the code:

C] A person only qualifies for a housing subsidy if he or she is:

- a. Resident: He or she is lawfully resident in South Africa (i.e. citizen of the Republic of South Africa or **in possession of a permanent resident permit**. Certified copies of the relevant documents must be submitted with the application).*

It is important to note that during the allocations process, it is only after an official document of acceptance from the Gauteng Housing Department has been received that formally links a name with a site does the ARP issue a housing allocation letter. The housing allocation letter serves no purpose other than to inform the person concerned that their application has met the requirements of the National Housing Code and that they will be allocated a house.

Inevitably there will be debate on whether or not “foreigners” who legally have permanent residence status in South Africa should be assigned RDP houses, but the ARP director, Julian Baskin, will not be drawn on the subject:

"My department cannot enter into a debate on who is or isn't a citizen, or who 'deserves' RDP housing. The ARP's responsibility is to adhere strictly to the national housing code in allocating houses to people displaced by new developments."

The ARP has established effective processes of community verification to ensure that the people who must be relocated to make way for development are actually those who are housed. Sadly the further fragmentation of the community, and the mistrust resulting from the violence, will complicate the processes necessary to enable new developments that require community co-operation.