



By: Sharmila Devi

Anti-migrant sentiment on the rise across Africa



Rising xenophobia is creating domestic conniptions across Africa in an echo of the anti-migrant passions unleashed in the West.

In Kenya, President William Ruto has led a crackdown on foreign nationals operating small businesses. In South Africa, a growing protest movement wants to kick out every undocumented migrant. In divided Libya, two rival authorities are escalating arrests and detentions of refugees and migrants.

Political and economic corruption and misinformation, together with unmet expectations and only a bleak future facing a growing number of young Africans, are behind much of the rise in bigotry and populism.

Some 12 million young Africans enter the **labour market** each year but only 3 million jobs are created, says the World Bank. Many of them end up working in petty trade or street vending.

It is hard to see how and when the scapegoating of African migrants, who just seek better lives within their own continent, will end given lacklustre political and economic reform, a massive shrinking of aid budgets, and continued neglect of African issues in the global arena.

Crackdown on foreign nationals

Kenya's Ruto, who faces a general election next year, announced that all small traders and businesses run by foreign nationals would be shut down by September 7. The order prompted hundreds of Burundians to rush to their embassy in Nairobi in search of travel documents to return home.

Kenya is home to many migrants from the East African Community, which allows freedom of movement among its member states: Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda.

"We have made efforts to improve the economy. We have not improved investor

confidence for hawkers to come to Kenya," said **Ruto**.

Nairobi later offered a temporary amnesty. But many Burundians, who number about 16,000 in Kenya, reported xenophobic attacks despite a government directive to security agencies and local authorities saying that foreign nationals were not to be "subjected to arbitrary harassment or discrimination."

Rights groups have condemned Kenya for its crackdown on migrants

Migrants make up only about 2% of Kenya's population, and some 47% of them are refugees, the majority of whom are from Somalia, followed by Uganda and South Sudan, according to UN figures.

Thousands of Kenyans have also gone abroad, with about 157,000 of them going to the US between 2016 and 2020, according to International Organisation of Migration (**IOM**) data.

Rights groups have condemned Kenya for its crackdown on migrants, in particular for setting up a hotline number for citizens to report irregular migrants in their neighbourhoods. "This approach is likely to ignite xenophobia against foreign workers, refugees and asylum seekers," said Seif Magango, Amnesty International's deputy director for East Africa, the Horn and the Great Lakes.

Hostile climate

Levels of xenophobia have reached even higher in South Africa, where the March and March group has been stepping up its protests against migrants ahead of the November 4 local elections.

After the group set a June 30 deadline for all **undocumented migrants** to leave, about 160,000 people left in the following month,

according to an AFP tally. The majority were from Zimbabwe and Malawi.

Migrants in South Africa, who officially account for less than 4% of the population, have been **beaten up** and seen their small shops looted and attacked.



In Libya, arrests of migrants are rising while men, women and children in an IOM refugee centre were assaulted in an attack last month

At the opposite end of the continent in Libya, arrests of migrants are rising while men, women and children in an IOM refugee centre were assaulted in an attack last month.

There is rising incitement in the media and by officials in both the UN-recognised government centred around Tripoli in the west and the eastern government around Tobruk and Sirte, says **Libya Crimes Watch**, an NGO.

“The attack took place amid continuing campaigns of incitement, hate speech and disinformation targeting migrants and the international and humanitarian organisations that provide them with protection and assistance,” said the group.

The hostile climate in Libya has so far failed to deter the European Union, which has expanded co-operation with both rival authorities in the country in an effort to contain migrants and refugees in the country and prevent them from crossing the Mediterranean to reach Europe.

“It is abhorrent that rival Libyan authorities are uniting in the abuse of **migrants and**

refugees, deploying racist rhetoric, ignoring refugee claims and arbitrarily detaining thousands before expelling them, including collectively at land borders,” said Diana Eltahawy, deputy regional director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International.

Migration numbers will only rise

Around the world there is little sign that governments are seeking to engage with the issue of migration in a manner that involves fact as well as compassion, with too many politicians resorting to populist scapegoating.

In the rich world, arguments about a looming shortage of young workers whose taxes are needed to fund the retirement of an ageing population fall on deaf ears.

It is easier to blame someone else for stealing jobs rather than creating them

People in the poorer world see little alternative to fleeing moribund or actively harsh regimes and governments but face rising hostility in the countries that actually need their labour.

As climate change, together with war and conflict gather pace, migration numbers will only rise. IOM says **international migrants** comprise 3.5 per cent of the global population, compared with 3.3 per cent in 2015 and 2.8 per cent in 2000.

In the meantime, it is easier to blame someone else for stealing jobs rather than creating them.