

From Xenophobia to Repatriation: South Africa's Expulsion of Undocumented African Migrants of 2026 and its Global Implications

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Abstract

This study examines South Africa's 2026 expulsion of undocumented African migrants, its regional and global implications. Using Securitization Theory and Regional Integration Theory, the paper analyses how undocumented migration has been framed as a national security threat, legitimizing stricter immigration enforcement and mass deportation. The study argues that while South Africa possesses the sovereign right to regulate migration, the securitization of migration has been reinforced by rising unemployment, inequality, crime, weak service delivery, and anti-migrant mobilization led by groups such as Operation Dudula, the March & March Movement, and Insizwa Nobunsizwa. Relying on secondary data from Statistics South Africa, Xenowatch, official documents, journal articles, newspapers, and media reports, the study finds that the expulsions have generated humanitarian concerns, strained diplomatic relations, threatened regional integration, and weakened South Africa's Pan-African credentials. It concludes that immigration enforcement alone cannot address irregular migration and recommends strengthened regional cooperation, evidence-based migration governance, and robust measures to combat xenophobia while safeguarding migrants' rights.

Keywords: Migration Governance, Undocumented Migrants, Securitisation, Regional Integration, Xenophobia, South Africa

Introduction

In a world characterised by inequality, segregation, and unequal opportunities, migration remains inevitable. International migration has become a defining issue in contemporary politics, security, and development (United Nations, n.d.). There are about 304 million international migrants globally, including 41.6 million refugees, with nearly 68 per cent hosted by low- and middle-income countries (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2026; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2026). While migration promotes economic growth and regional integration, it has also intensified debates over national sovereignty, employment, security, and social cohesion, prompting many states to adopt stricter immigration controls and repatriate undocumented migrants (IOM, 2026).

South Africa remains one of Africa's principal migrant destinations because of its relatively advanced economy. Migration is regulated under the Immigration Act 13 of 2002, which replaced the apartheid-era Aliens Control Act and was strengthened through amendments in 2004, 2011, and 2014. Since the end of apartheid, the country has attracted migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other African states. However, rising unemployment, economic hardship, and crime have fueled xenophobic attitudes, restrictive immigration policies, and the repatriation of undocumented migrants (Misago &

Landau, 2023), alongside allegations of state complicity (Landau & Misago, 2026). Landau and Misago (2026) argue that safeguarding South Africa's constitutional democracy requires prosecuting perpetrators of exclusionary violence, enforcing the rule of law impartially, and strengthening political accountability for xenophobic rhetoric and actions.

These developments extend beyond South Africa's borders. As a leading member of the African Union and the Southern African Development Community, the country's migration policies raise important questions about its commitment to Pan-Africanism, regional integration, and human rights (Bhanye, 2026; Nkala, 2026). Government denial and complicity in xenophobic tendencies have also damaged South Africa's domestic and international image (Niyitung, 2021). Although previous studies have examined apartheid (Smith, 1992; Beinart & Dubow, 1995) and xenophobia (Misago et al., 2021; Misago & Landau, 2023), limited attention has been paid to the recent repatriation of undocumented migrants. This study addresses this gap by examining the domestic drivers and regional implications of South Africans forceful expulsion of undocumented immigrants in June 2026. This is significant for public policy, global migration policy and population studies. The study relied primarily on secondary data from Statistics South Africa, official reports, scholarly literature, newspapers, and online media.

Conceptual Framework

Repatriation is the process of returning individuals to their country of origin, either voluntarily or involuntarily. While voluntary repatriation occurs by choice, involuntary repatriation (deportation) results from violations of immigration laws. Although states have the sovereign right to regulate migration, international law requires deportations to respect due process and human rights.

Undocumented African migrants are individuals residing or working in another African country without valid legal authorization or after overstaying their visas. The term "undocumented" is preferred because it describes legal status rather than criminalizing individuals. In South Africa, they remain particularly vulnerable to arrest, detention, deportation, discrimination, and xenophobic violence.

Xenophobia refers to fear, prejudice, or hostility toward perceived foreigners, often manifested through discrimination, exclusion, hate speech, or violence. In South Africa, it has largely targeted African migrants, driven by perceptions that they compete with citizens for jobs, housing, business opportunities, and public services.

Migration governance encompasses the laws, institutions, policies, and practices through which states regulate cross-border migration. It seeks to balance national sovereignty and border security with human rights, refugee protection, labour mobility, and regional integration.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts Securitization Theory and Regional Integration Theory to explain the domestic drivers and regional implications of South Africa's expulsion of undocumented African migrants. Developed by the Copenhagen School in the 1990s, Securitization Theory explains how political leaders transform ordinary policy issues into matters of national security through strategic discourse (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995). According to the theory, an issue becomes a security threat because political actors successfully convince the public that it poses an existential danger requiring extraordinary measures beyond normal political processes (Buzan et al., 1998). Through such "speech acts," governments legitimize restrictive policies that might otherwise face political or legal opposition (Wæver, 1995). In migration studies, the theory

explains how undocumented migration is framed as a threat to national sovereignty, public safety, economic opportunities, and social cohesion, thereby justifying stricter border controls, detention, deportation, and intensified immigration enforcement (Buzan et al., 1998). In South Africa, it provides a useful lens for understanding how undocumented African migrants were constructed as security threats to justify the 2026 expulsion policy (Buzan et al., 1998; Wæver, 1995).

Regional Integration Theory explains how neighbouring states cooperate through regional institutions to promote peace, economic development, political stability, and collective security (Haas, 1958). Closely associated with Haas's neo-functionalist perspective, the theory argues that cooperation in one sector often generates "spillover" effects that deepen integration in other areas (Haas, 1958). It is particularly relevant to African migration governance, where regional organisations such as the Southern African Development Community and the African Union seek to balance free movement with national security concerns. South Africa's 2026 expulsion of undocumented African migrants highlights the tension between state sovereignty and regional commitments to integration, solidarity, and cooperative migration governance (Haas, 1958; Nye, 1968). Together, the two theories provide a complementary framework for analysing both the domestic securitization of migration and its implications for regional diplomacy, interstate trust, and African integration.

Result of the Findings

History of Xenophobia in South Africa

South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy represents one of Africa's most significant political transformations. Apartheid, formally introduced in 1948 by the National Party, institutionalized racial segregation and white minority rule through laws that denied the Black majority political rights, quality education, freedom of movement, and economic opportunities (Beninart & Dubow, 1995). The regime enforced racial inequality through state violence, forced removals, mass arrests, and political repression.

The literature traces xenophobia in South Africa to the post-apartheid era, despite the country's transition to democracy in 1994. Historically, South Africa has attracted migrants from across Africa because of its relatively advanced economy and employment opportunities (Crush et al., 1991). However, persistent unemployment, poverty, inequality, and inadequate service delivery have fueled resentment toward foreign nationals. According to Harris (2002), migrants are often portrayed as competitors for jobs, housing, and public services, creating an environment conducive to xenophobic violence. Notable outbreaks occurred in 2008, 2015, 2019, and subsequent years, resulting in deaths, destruction of property, and the displacement of thousands of African migrants (Landau, 2011). Neocosmos (2010) argues that xenophobia in South Africa is rooted not only in economic frustrations but also in state narratives that depict undocumented migrants as threats to national security and social stability.

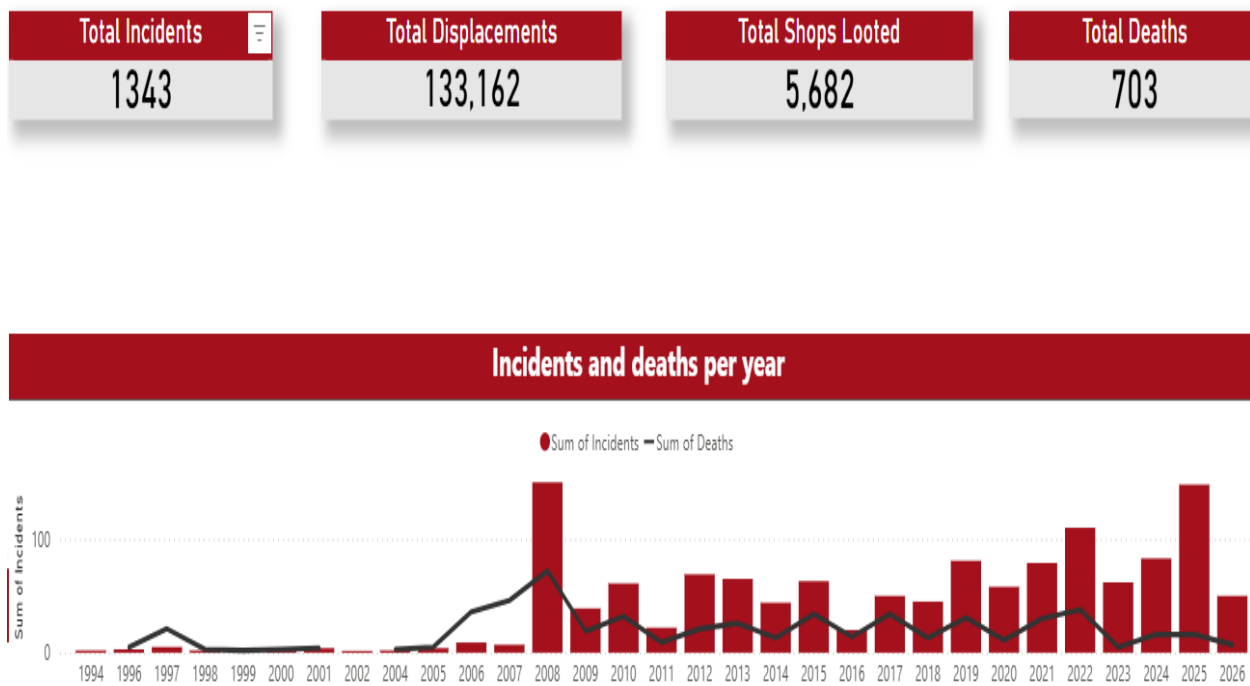


Figure 1: Incidents of Xenophobic Discrimination in South Africa, 1994- 6 July 2026

Source: Xenowatch, 2026

Figure 1 shows that between 1994 and 2026, South Africa recorded over 1,300 xenophobic incidents, causing at least 703 deaths and displacing about 133,162 people. Major outbreaks occurred in 2008, 2015, 2019, and 2021, predominantly targeting migrants (Misago et al., 2021).

Ironically, this hostility contrasts sharply with the solidarity South Africa received during the anti-apartheid struggle. Domestic resistance by the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress, alongside Nelson Mandela's imprisonment, galvanized global opposition to apartheid (Misago et al., 2021). Regionally, the Organization of African Unity established the Liberation Committee in 1963 to coordinate support for liberation movements (OAU, 1963), while Frontline States, including Tanzania, Zambia, Mozambique, Angola, and Botswana, provided refuge and logistical assistance despite military reprisals (Temu & Tembe, 2014). Nigeria further contributed through financial assistance, scholarships, sanctions advocacy, and the Southern African Relief Fund (Egedo, 1987; Garba, 1987). These combined domestic, regional, and international efforts culminated in Nelson Mandela's release, South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, and the end of apartheid (Beinart & Dubow, 1995; Mandela, 1994). Below is a table showing immigrants in South Africa by their countries.

Table 1: Immigrants in South Africa by country

Country of Origin	Estimated Migrants in South Africa (2024)	Share of Population	Migrant Notes
Zimbabwe	1,072,620	41.7%	Largest migrant community
Mozambique	412,058	16.0%	Mainly labour migration
Lesotho	237,718	9.2%	Long-standing circular migration
Malawi	220,437	8.6%	Mining and agricultural labour
Ethiopia	104,402	4.1%	Mainly urban entrepreneurship
Democratic Republic of Congo	57,519	2.2%	Refugees and economic migrants
United Kingdom	55,144	2.1%	Historical and skilled migrants
Somalia	42,516	1.7%	Refugees and traders
Namibia	34,273	1.3%	Cross-border migration
Bangladesh	30,637	1.2%	Business migration
Republic of the Congo	29,093	1.1%	Mixed migration
India	27,674	1.1%	Skilled and business migration
Other Countries	248,198	9.7%	Remaining origins
Total International Migrants	2,572,289	100%	UN estimate for 2024

Source: compiled by the authors from Statistics South Africa

Table 1 shows that citizens from the South African Development Community (SADC) make up the large immigrants in South Africa.

Table 2: Citizenship status of immigrants, 2001, 2011 and 2022

Citizenship	2001	2011	2022
South African citizens	585,435	582,904	529,542
Non-South African citizens	439,642	1,541,942	1,828,375
Total	1,025,077	2,124,846	2,357,917

Source: South Africa Statistics, 2023: 23

The recurring violence has attracted widespread condemnation from the international community. The African Union, the Southern African Development Community, the United Nations, and the International Organization for Migration have consistently urged South Africa to protect migrants, prosecute perpetrators, and address the structural causes of xenophobia. Several African governments, including Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique,

formally protested the attacks and demanded greater protection for their citizens. In 2019, Nigeria evacuated hundreds of its nationals following violent attacks on foreign-owned businesses, while diplomatic tensions temporarily strained bilateral relations between the two countries.

Despite repeated government commitments to combating xenophobia through public awareness campaigns, law enforcement, and migration reforms, the recurrence of anti-immigrant violence suggests that the underlying drivers—economic hardship, unemployment, inequality, weak service delivery, and political rhetoric—remain largely unresolved. Consequently, xenophobia continues to shape South Africa's migration policies and its relations with other African states, posing significant challenges to regional integration, Pan-Africanism, and human security.

Actors Responsible for the Recent Threats and Eviction Notices

Recent scholarship identifies both state and non-state actors as contributors to anti-migrant campaigns. Government agencies, particularly the Department of Home Affairs and law enforcement agencies, have intensified immigration enforcement through operations targeting undocumented migrants (Vigneswaran, 2008). At the community level, pressure groups such as Operation Dudula have been identified as key actors behind recent threats, forced evictions, and demands for the removal of undocumented African migrants from businesses and residential areas (Misago, 2022). Scholars argue that political elites, community leaders, and sections of the media have also contributed by promoting narratives linking migrants to crime, unemployment, and declining public services (Crush & Ramachandran, 2010). These narratives have often legitimized public hostility and reinforced exclusionary attitudes toward foreign nationals. However, the recent threat was orchestrated by some non-state actors.

The Tripartite Collaboration: Insizwa Nobusizwa, Operation Dudula and the March and March Movement

Operation Dudula, the vigilante movement and now political party, (meaning “Pushback” in isiZulu), was formed in Soweto by Nhlanhla Lux Dlamini. On June 16, 2021, Operation Dudula launched a campaign called “Let’s Clean Soweto” to rid the township of “illegal migrants,” drug dealers, and foreign business owners, targeting and evicting migrants from Zimbabwe and Mozambique, as well as local South Africans who were wrongly identified as foreign nationals (Dratwa, 2024). The march targeted suspected drug traffickers and businesses accused of employing undocumented migrants at wages below legal standards (Myeni, 2022). Presenting itself as a civic movement advocating for the enforcement of South Africa's immigration laws, Operation Dudula expanded rapidly from a localized initiative into a nationwide anti-immigrant campaign. By 2022, its activists were organizing protests outside hospitals and clinics in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, while similar groups such as the Alexandra Dudula Movement emerged across working-class communities. Through community patrols, public rallies, and extensive use of traditional and social media, Dlamini framed the movement as defending the interests of South African citizens. Operation Dudula argued that undocumented migrants contributed to unemployment, crime, overcrowded healthcare facilities, housing shortages, and the growth of the informal economy. It consequently advocated stricter border controls, immigration verification campaigns, and the deportation of undocumented migrants. Operation Dudula adopted a decentralized strategy, organizing inspections of businesses, monitoring informal settlements, staging protests, and pressuring authorities to intensify immigration enforcement. Social media facilitated rapid information dissemination, supporter mobilization, and coordination of activities across multiple provinces.

The March and March movement was established in 2024 by Jacinta Ngobese-Zuma. A Former Vuma FM radio presenter and civic activist from Durban. The movement aims to give voice to citizens' concerns about undocumented immigration, resource access, and national priorities. She has mobilized thousands of South Africans through demonstrations and campaigns, making the movement a significant force in the national conversation about immigration policy and citizen protection (March & March Movement, nd).

Insizwa Nobunsizwa is a South African socio-economic movement and development foundation. Led by Nkosikhona "Phakela'umthakathi" Ndabandaba, the group advocates for local economic development, job creation for citizens, and campaigns against undocumented foreign nationals. On its instagram page, its objectives are to among other things restore the lost fabric of South Africa, fight against systemic oppression, the migrant labour system, and modern economic marginalisation which had stripped the black men (South Africans) of their traditional roles as providers and family heads, economic inequality and high unemployment rates.

These movements have been protesting and moving across homes, institutions forcing and threatening migrants on allegations of taking their jobs, selling drugs and taking their women among other flimsy and legal excuses. In 2025, it was reported that the Operation Dudula began to picket public institutions including hospitals and clinics in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces checking identity cards and stop anyone who is not South African from entering (Lakaje, 2025). With its violent activity, Judge Leicester Adams of the Johannesburg High Court handed down judgment forbidding Operation Dudula and its leaders from intimidating, harassing, and/or assaulting any individuals that they identify as being non-citizens, and from making public statements on social media platforms that constitute hate speech on November 4, 2025. Kaajal Ramjathan-Keogh, International court of justice (ICJ) Africa Director notes that the ruling reaffirmed that xenophobia, intimidation, harassment, and hate speech based on nationality, ethnicity, or social origin will not be tolerated in South Africa (ICJ, 2025).

By 2026, Operation Dudula had evolved from a localized protest movement into one of the most influential anti-immigration pressure groups in South Africa. Its sustained advocacy contributed to the growing politicization of migration and increased public pressure on government institutions to strengthen immigration enforcement.

The Expulsion of Undocumented Africans in 2026

Since 2026, anti-immigration movements have intensified campaigns demanding that foreign nationals leave South Africa, issuing ultimatums requiring undocumented migrants to depart by 30 June 2026. In response, the government engaged some movement leaders in dialogue while affirming their constitutional right to freedom of association. However, it has been widely criticised for failing to curb their anti-migrant rhetoric and activities, allowing these groups to become influential non-state actors shaping migration governance, populist mobilisation, and xenophobic politics.

The campaign has been led primarily by Operation Dudula, headed by Nhlanhla Lux Dlamini (Nhlanhla Lux). Since its establishment in 2021, the movement has advocated the removal of undocumented migrants through community mobilisation, public demonstrations, business inspections, and pressure on government institutions to enforce immigration laws. Other community organisations supported these efforts, while the South African Police Service and the Department of Home Affairs intensified immigration verification exercises, arrests, detention, and deportations.

Supporters argued that undocumented migrants contribute to unemployment, crime, pressure on healthcare and housing, and the expansion of the informal economy. They maintained that stricter immigration enforcement and deportations would create employment opportunities for South Africans, reduce crime, and restore public order. Critics, however, contend that these claims oversimplify South Africa's structural economic problems and unfairly scapegoat migrants for challenges rooted in inequality, weak economic growth, governance failures, and poor public service delivery.

In 2026, the campaign escalated beyond rhetoric. Operation Dudula and allied groups issued public notices urging undocumented migrants to leave voluntarily, conducted coordinated inspections of businesses and migrant communities, and reported suspected undocumented migrants to immigration authorities. These actions coincided with intensified immigration raids and deportation operations by state agencies, illustrating how civic mobilisation influenced enforcement. Human rights organisations, neighbouring African governments, and regional bodies criticised the campaign, warning that it threatened migrants' rights, strained diplomatic relations, and undermined South Africa's commitments to Pan-African solidarity and regional integration.

Regional and Global Implications of South Africa's Expulsion of Undocumented African Migrants

South Africa's expulsion of undocumented African migrants has implications beyond domestic immigration policy, affecting regional diplomacy and global migration governance. Repeated deportations and xenophobic attacks have strained relations with neighbouring countries, weakened SADC's integration agenda, and challenged South Africa's commitment to Pan-Africanism and international human rights norms (Adebajo, 2017). Although states have the sovereign right to regulate migration, deportation policies must uphold due process, dignity, and non-discrimination (Hathaway, 2005). Consequently, anti-immigration campaigns and mass deportations should be understood not merely as domestic immigration measures but as issues with significant humanitarian, diplomatic, and regional governance consequences.

Securitization Theory, developed by Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde (1998), provides a useful lens for analysing these developments. The theory explains how political actors frame migration as an existential threat requiring extraordinary policy responses. In South Africa, irregular migration has increasingly been portrayed as a threat to employment, national security, public services, and social cohesion, thereby legitimizing stricter immigration enforcement, enhanced border controls, and accelerated deportations. At the same time, government officials have sought to distinguish lawful immigration enforcement from xenophobia, insisting that only the state has the authority to enforce immigration laws, reflecting the tension between migration securitization and constitutional governance.

Table 3: Repatriations since the Protests as at July 6, 2026

Country	Status of Repatriation	Evidence/Details	Estimated Number
Malawi	Confirmed Largest operation	The Malawian government, working with South African authorities, established reception centres and organized buses and border clearance for returning citizens.	15,162+ processed by 25 June; additional returnees continued after 30 June. About 21,000 expected.
Ghana	Confirmed	Chartered evacuation flights and coordinated voluntary repatriation through Ghanaian diplomatic missions.	About 340 passengers on one charter flight; additional departures of 900 reported.
Nigeria	Confirmed	Nigerian authorities coordinated voluntary returns through the High Commission and continued evacuation efforts as violence escalated.	270 already repatriated and another 600 being processed.
Mozambique	Confirmed	Mozambique coordinated repatriation of nationals through border crossings and diplomatic channels.	About 738 repatriated so far, with more being processed.
Zimbabwe	Confirmed	Listed by the South African government among countries conducting voluntary repatriation of citizens.	60,000 repatriated, with more to follow.
Kenya	Confirmed	The South African Inter-Ministerial Committee stated that Kenya had come forward to repatriate its nationals.	About 151 repatriated so far, with more being processed.
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Confirmed	Officially identified by the South African government as participating in voluntary repatriation.	Not officially published.
Uganda	Confirmed	International media reported Uganda organizing returns for citizens seeking evacuation, although detailed government figures have not yet been released.	About 700 repatriated in three batches, with more being processed.
Lesotho	Confirmed	Initially stated it would not repatriate its citizens but later donated about five buses to facilitate returns.	Not officially published.

While Table 3 shows the number of expelled immigrants as at July 6; official information from the government reveals that more than 53,000 immigrants had left the country (Kagoe, 2026).

Many African migrants move to South Africa because of unemployment, political instability, conflict, weak economies, and limited livelihood opportunities in their home countries, while South Africa's relatively diversified economy offers greater employment prospects despite its own socioeconomic challenges. Lee (1966) argues that migration results from the interaction of push factors in countries of origin and pull factors in destination countries. Consequently, deportation addresses only the destination country's immigration policy without tackling the structural conditions that continue to drive migration across Southern Africa. Recent policy analyses similarly contend that enforcement alone cannot resolve irregular migration where regional inequalities and governance failures remain the principal drivers of mobility.

Regionally, the deportations pose significant challenges to the Southern African Development Community (SADC), whose objectives include regional integration, labour mobility, and economic cooperation. Although SADC has not achieved the level of free movement found in the European Union, its integration agenda depends on mutual trust and cooperative migration governance. Large-scale deportations risk straining relations with neighbouring countries such as

Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, and Lesotho, whose citizens constitute a substantial share of South Africa's migrant population. While the South African Government has coordinated repatriation protocols with SADC member states, the policy has also triggered retaliatory responses. Several countries have issued ultimatums to South African citizens and businesses operating within their borders. For example, the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) gave South African businesses a four-day ultimatum to leave Nigeria (News Agency of Nigeria, 2026). Likewise, Ghana declined a proposed state visit by President Cyril Ramaphosa following escalating xenophobic attacks against Ghanaians in South Africa (Naadi, 2026). Diplomatic sources reported that approximately 1,000 Ghanaians had returned home, with about 900 others registered for repatriation after a Ghanaian national was killed during anti-migrant demonstrations on 30 June (Naadi, 2026).

The economic implications are substantial. South Africa has long relied on migrant labour in mining, agriculture, construction, domestic services, and hospitality. Although undocumented migration presents regulatory challenges, migrant workers help fill labour shortages and sustain key sectors of the economy. Large-scale deportations therefore risk disrupting labour markets and increasing labour costs for employers. At the same time, neighbouring countries receiving deportees may face rising unemployment, declining remittance inflows, and additional pressure on already overstretched public services. Because migration has historically served as a regional livelihood strategy, abrupt disruptions to these migration networks have economic consequences that extend beyond South Africa.

The humanitarian consequences are equally significant. Beyond the reported casualties, many migrants have lived in South Africa for years, established families, and become integrated into local communities. The current climate has forced many to leave relatives behind or flee because of fear generated by anti-immigrant mobilisation rather than formal deportation alone. Humanitarian organisations have raised concerns over family separation, displacement, and the vulnerability of migrants caught between state immigration enforcement and xenophobic violence. These developments underscore the need to distinguish legitimate immigration control from the protection of migrants' fundamental rights under South Africa's Constitution and international human rights obligations.

Table 4: Casualty by Country so far as at July 6, 2026

Country	Name of Person(s)	Location in South Africa	Reported Deaths
Mozambique	Five Mozambican nationals (names not publicly released)	Mossel Bay, Western Cape	5
Nigeria	Emeka Iroegbu (died in police custody); another unnamed Nigerian shopkeeper	Pretoria (Gauteng); eMalahleni (Mpumalanga)	2
Malawi	Unnamed 29-year-old Malawian national	Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal	1
Ethiopia	Five Ethiopian nationals (reported by WHO Director-General; names not released)	Locations not officially specified	5
Ghana	Unnamed Ghanaian national	Johannesburg, Gauteng	1
Total			14

Source: compiled by the authors

At the continental level, the events raise broader questions regarding implementation of the African Union's migration governance agenda. The AU has consistently advocated migration

policies that facilitate legal mobility while protecting migrants' rights and promoting regional economic integration. If South Africa which is the continent's largest destination for intra-African migration adopts increasingly restrictive migration policies, other African states may follow similar approaches. Such policy diffusion could complicate ongoing continental efforts toward greater labour mobility under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), where movement of skilled and semi-skilled labour is increasingly recognized as an important component of economic integration. South Africa's multinational corporations are vulnerable to deteriorating diplomatic relations. Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN), Standard Bank, and Gold Fields could face consumer boycotts, reputational damage, and regulatory restrictions across African markets, threatening investments and regional business operations as anti-migrant policies heighten tensions (Bloomberg, 2026).

Globally, South Africa's experience reflects wider international trends. Across Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, migration has increasingly become securitized as governments respond to public concerns regarding irregular migration, border control, and national identity. South Africa therefore illustrates that migration politics is not exclusively a Global North phenomenon but has become an increasingly important governance challenge within the Global South. Recent scholarship similarly argues that securitization has become a dominant framework through which African migration is interpreted, often emphasizing enforcement while paying less attention to migration's developmental contributions.

Conclusion

South Africa's 2026 expulsion of undocumented African migrants highlights the tension between national sovereignty, migration governance, and regional integration. Although the state has the legal authority to enforce immigration laws, the securitisation of migration has reinforced xenophobic attitudes, strained diplomatic relations, and weakened regional cooperation. The study finds that deportation alone cannot address the structural drivers of migration, including unemployment, inequality, conflict, and weak governance. Sustainable migration governance therefore requires balancing border security with constitutional rights, regional cooperation, legal migration pathways, and measures that address the root causes of migration while combating xenophobia and protecting migrants' rights.

Recommendations

The recommendations of this paper include;

- i. South Africa should collaborate with SADC member states to establish a legally binding regional migration governance framework that harmonises immigration policies, strengthens information sharing, coordinates repatriation procedures, and expands legal labour migration. Such a framework would improve border management, reduce irregular migration, minimise diplomatic tensions, and advance regional integration.
- ii. The government should complement immigration enforcement with policies addressing unemployment, inequality, poor service delivery, and misinformation about migrants. Public awareness campaigns, community dialogue, skills development, employment initiatives, and evidence-based communication on migrants' economic contributions would help reduce xenophobia and anti-migrant mobilisation.
- iii. Government agencies should ensure that immigration enforcement fully complies with constitutional guarantees, international human rights law, and refugee protection obligations. Law enforcement must prevent vigilante groups from assuming immigration functions, prosecute

perpetrators of xenophobic violence and hate speech, and establish independent oversight of detention and deportation processes. These measures would reinforce the state's lawful authority while protecting migrants' rights and restoring confidence in South Africa's migration governance system.

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