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AFRICA/SOUTH AFRICA - Resurgence of xenophobic violence feared; spokesman from Bishops' Conference tells Fides: "We are in contact with the Internal Affairs Minister and we continue to observe how the situation evolves."

Johannesburg (Agenzia Fides) - "We are in contact with the Internal Affairs Minister and we continue to observe how the situation evolves, to see what exactly is taking place. When we have a clear picture of what is happening, we can make an assessment," Fr. Chris Townsend, spokesman for the SACBC (Bishops' Conference of South Africa, Botswana, and Swaziland) tells Agenzia Fides, in light of the situation of nearly 2,700 Zimbabwean migrants who have been forced to take refuge in government buildings in De Doorns, a farming town about 140km from Cape Town, South Africa.

In recent days, Zimbabweans have been the target of xenphobic attacks from the local people, who accuse them of having "taken away their jobs," as the Zimbabweans are willing to accept lower salaries than South Africans, working in agricultural businesses in the area.

According to the press agency promoted by the UN, IRIN, on the morning of November 17, organized bands attacked the camp in Stofland, the largest squatter camp in De Doorns. The local police station commander, Superintendent Desmond van der Westhuizen, told IRIN that the situation had been tense since 13 November, when Zimbabweans had been involved in a violent spat in an informal tavern. "Following that incident, some 68 Zimbabweans" had fled the area, fearing a resurgence of xenophobic violence. The police, accompanied by local government and disaster management officials, held a meeting with the informal settlement residents on the evening of 16 November to calm the situation. "But the residents threatened to prevent the Zimbabweans from going to work on 17 November [Monday morning]," van der Westhuizen told IRIN. Police had to fire rubber bullets to disperse the residents, who attacked some more shacks in Stofland, forcing the Zimbabweans to flee. "Fortunately, none of the Zimbabweans were harmed and they all moved out with their personal belongings voluntarily," the police superintendent said.

This episode brings back memories of the tide of xenophobic violence that erupted in Johannesburg in May 2008 and quickly spread through most parts of the country, killing more than 60 people and displacing about 100,000 others.

The return of xenophobic tensions is also linked to the recent global economic recession that has hit South Africa hard. The government's latest labor force survey said 484,000 jobs had been lost in the last six months, and unemployment stood at 24.5 percent for the period July to September 2009, up from 23.2 percent during the same period in 2008. (LM) (Agenzia Fides 18/11/2009)

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