



Christmas in Polokwane

Kamini Karlekar

Abstract

In March 2009 the author was deployed to work as a Protection Officer with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Musina, South Africa, eight kilometres from the border with Zimbabwe. As a Protection Officer, she focused on the needs of the hundreds of Zimbabweans crossing the border into Musina to escape the political, economic and social crisis in their country. This article comes from the pages of her journal and documents the turbulence in her mind and in the lives of those she was expected to protect.

Author Profile

Kamini Karlekar consults on refugee and migration issues. Over the last ten years she has worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in India, the United Kingdom, Sudan, Liberia, Israel, South Africa, Egypt and Switzerland. In 2008 she published her first book, *(Un)settled - Notes from a shifting life* - a work of non-fiction based on her experiences in Sudan and Liberia. She has degrees in History, Development Studies and Refugees Studies from the Universities of Delhi, London and Oxford, and is currently working on her second book.

In March 2009 I was deployed to work as a Protection Officer with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Musina, South Africa, eight kilometres from the border with Zimbabwe. For the next year, I focused on the needs of the hundreds of Zimbabweans crossing the border into Musina every day to escape the political, economic and social crisis in their country. Once in South Africa they registered as asylum seekers and were considered for refugee status. While the government handled all the asylum issues, international and local organisations provided assistance and protection.

In my work with newly-arrived Zimbabweans, I responded to, among other issues, sexual and gender based violence; human smuggling; cross border harassment and violence; shortages of food and shelter; challenges accessing documentation; and xenophobic attacks. While I dealt with many difficult and traumatic incidents in Musina, one particular xenophobic attack that occurred in December 2009 in Polokwane, left me very disturbed. Although it did not compare with the xenophobic violence of May 2008 when 1,00,000 people were displaced and over sixty people killed in South Africa, or attacks that took place in the Western Cape at the same time in 2009, it was the first large-scale attack I dealt with.

A young man with his face cut in half stood facing me. Blood dripped off his body. His head was full of oozing wounds. He was speaking to me but I couldn't hear any words. Behind him were other young men, their faces all cut in half. They started walking towards me, their arms outstretched. I woke up screaming. Was it a scene from a movie? Was it just a bad dream? Was it a premonition? I called my fiancé at work. When I had finished recounting my nightmare, he said one word: 'Polokwane'.

My phone rang at 6 a.m. The line was crackly but the voice at the other end was deadly calm. 'Kamini, how quickly can you get ready?'

Quickly enough, why?

'There were xenophobic attacks in Polokwane the night before', my colleague said, '106 Zimbabweans have been moved from the township they lived in to a stadium. We need to get there now'.

A bit hard given Polokwane was over two hours away, but I got his drift. As I got into the office car half an hour later, I started calling other agencies. One of my responsibilities in Musina was to coordinate inter-agency emergency response. In Musina, this meant that between us, UNHCR, Medicin San Frontier (MSF), International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNICEF and a small number of local faith based organisations, we had to cover everything from food, shelter, medical assistance, psycho-social care, transport and documentation. I wondered what it would mean in Polokwane, and how we would manage the distance.

An increase in crime and rape in the township had supposedly led to animosity between the local South Africans and Zimbabweans. Things got out of hand after a young South African man was murdered. A community meeting was held and it was decided the Zimbabweans were responsible and had to be driven out, or killed. The local men, drunk and aggressive, then went through the township in their pick-up trucks, brandishing golf clubs and broken

beer bottles, pulled out every Zimbabwean they could find and beat them till they were bloody and broken.

In December 2009 in Musina, I was used to being called out to deal with refugee emergencies almost everyday. A man was attacked and raped at the border, could I please find safe shelter for him. There was mayhem at the detention centre where a refugee was refusing to hand over a child that the police were certain wasn't his. A young unaccompanied child was trading sexual favours for joy rides down the highway to Pretoria and back. And in July, twenty two Zimbabwean men were chased out of a village they had lived in for a year, their homes looted and burnt. As it turned out, a few of them were construction workers who hadn't been paid wages for six to eight months. There too, crime was touted as the reason, while the locals secretly rejoiced at how effectively they had dealt with their debt. This was life in the field, life at the border, and I was used to it. Or so I thought.

Polokwane was the most important urban center north of Johannesburg, and the capital of Limpopo province. Once in Polokwane, we found a confused, dazed group of people sitting around at the stadium. In a press statement, the police spokesperson said, 'When we arrived at Westernburg¹, we found a lot of foreign nationals injured, bleeding and in pain. Most had serious hack and stab wounds. Many others had been stoned. It was clear that they had been beaten, stoned and left for dead by angry locals. Some of the victims who were found hiding in the bushes and in different parts of Westernburg were in a serious condition'². Twenty South Africans were arrested, seven young Zimbabwean men reportedly found lying in a pool of blood³ with serious head wounds were taken to the hospital and the remaining Zimbabweans were moved to the stadium for their safety.

It was clear that the incident was being taken seriously. Political statements were issued, the local community was addressed by local politicians, police officials and representatives of the local government, and the displaced quickly relocated to a safe location where their basic needs for food and shelter were met. Polokwane had hosted the fifty-second African National Congress Conference of 2007 when Jacob Zuma was chosen party leader and was due to host a few games during the FIFA soccer World Cup in 2010. It was in fact an old wing of the Peter Mokaba Stadium, where the World Cup games were to be held, that the police relocated the foreign nationals. Everybody was scrambling to preserve the image of the city. An increase in unemployment and petty theft was the stated reason for the clash. Nobody wanted to hear the word xenophobia.

Along one wall, in the shade, lay a young man. His face was bloated. His eyes, little slits, were bruised and swollen. A big, heavy bandage was wrapped around his head and his shoulder was covered in gashes. He leaned against a sack, his breathing slow and laborious, a bottle of Fanta at his feet. The wounds on his face were oozing blood and pus. As we arranged for an ambulance for him, seven other young men emerged from inside the building, all with serious head wounds. They had been released after the most cursory examination and were given some Paracetamol for pain. They had recognized the UN car. They sat down around me and started to speak. They were angry, and terrified. I tried my best to focus on what they were saying and not look directly at their cuts and wounds,

¹ The township where the violence occurred.

² <http://greatindaba.com/issue/december-vol-15/article/polokwane-turns-on-zimbabweans>

³ <http://www.observer.co.za/stories/xenophobia-either-police-remove-them-or->

almost impossible given their faces were criss-crossed with rough black stitches and streaked with dried blood.

'I'm nineteen. I arrived in South Africa a few months before. My family is in Harare; they'd sent me to make some money. I worked as a daily labourer, my boss man, he lives in the township. I heard all the shouting. I was hiding in my shack. I put my bed, my table, my stove against the door. I lay flat on the ground. But they saw me. There were three of them. They took turns kicking and punching me. Then one started with a golf club and repeatedly hit me on the head. I said "Please, I'm the only one to look after my people, let me be" and then he took out the beer bottle, and hit me with that too'.⁴ His lip shook as he fought to hold back the tears. A colleague held his hands and spoke to him in Shona⁵, comforting him as he finally broke down. A frail, slight young man, he was barely more than a boy.

The eight young men were the worst affected. Blamed for stealing jobs, women, and for the murder - they were the main targets of the attack. But a hundred plus others had also been attacked and several hundred displaced. We went from group to group, gathering information and details. 'I was just putting some food on my child's plate' said a young woman holding a five-year-old boy on her lap. 'He said "Mummy, what's that sound?" and then I heard them. I told him "Get up, get up, we have to go" and I opened the back door and we ran. I heard later someone saw my husband being beaten. I don't know where he is. He is an old man. I am so worried he has died.' Turning her face to the side, she continued, 'What do I tell my child? Why did this happen to us? Where will we ever be safe?' Shaking her head, she walked away. I never heard if she found her husband.

Another middle-aged woman grabbed my hand and took me aside. She showed me her bruises. The men had grabbed at her, ripping open her shirt. She was saved by her elderly South African landlord who came and stood in front of her, shaming the hoodlums. While no rapes were reported, we were told that many hadn't made it to the stadium. There were reportedly no deaths either, but again some of the young men believed people had been killed and their bodies dumped.

At 1 a.m. the next morning, we had got everyone's names and details. MSF had set up a mobile emergency clinic. Food, water, blankets had already been provided by the local Municipality. We established temporary committees, settled the different groups down for the night and hit the road. I got home at 3 a.m., and was back on the road at 6 a.m. For the next two weeks, the two-hour drive back and forth was my daily grind. There was always something to be dealt with, from rallying for food donations, attending coordination meetings with government, and working with Home Affairs to update documents, to waiting with the people till the lights came on at night so they were less scared. We had become their security blanket.

A week into the displacement, the government started agitating that it was time for the asylum seekers to move on. They needed their stadium back; it needed to be prettied up for the World Cup. It was ten days to Christmas and they wanted all this wrapped up so they could start planning their holidays. Besides, they had ticked all the boxes. They had provided the people safety, food, water; they had made all the right political statements. It was time for us, the 'guardian angels', to step up, or step out. In an effort to find the right solution, we attended a community meeting at the township to evaluate if the asylum

⁴ Interview with author.

⁵ A Zimbabwean language.

seekers could return home. A Home Affairs officer sat right at the back. The ward councilors who were expecting us, sat up at the front. We were taken to join them and there we sat, facing the community. Most smiled at us graciously but one belligerent young man stood up "Who are you?" he demanded, "We don't need more foreigners". He shouted that the Zimbabweans were criminals and that they were not welcome. He was one of the twenty men arrested for the violence against the Zimbabweans. He was, like the others, released without charge.

"We are not opposed to foreigners", a well-dressed community member said, as the young man was pushed down. "It's the bad apples we want out. They are committing crime" she said, 'and the police are doing nothing to stop them". She said the township was poor and neglected. They had very poor services and the foreigners added to their problems. They were struggling with unemployment and food security issues. Their needs were being ignored by the government and so they felt they had to do something themselves to correct the situation. They weren't against the foreigners. In fact, the Zimbabweans were welcome to come back, but they must promise to stop their criminal activities, and behave 'properly'.

In the back, the young man continued to make threats. As we left the meeting, he walked up to the car. He leered, slurring on his words, "don't you want to speak to me, lady. I've got some stories to tell. No, you're not interested in me. You're only here for your Zimbabweans." He was dragged away before I could speak.

It was an isolated incident, the authorities said, even as attacks on a smaller scale started out in other townships. "Look at these asylum seekers, they have nothing. You have to give them more so they won't steal. Then everything will be fine". It was about crime, and poverty not xenophobia. It was that we were so close to Christmas, the people were desperate, tempers were short. It was about the situation in Zimbabwe overflowing into South Africa. Back at the stadium, the people refused to move back. They didn't believe it was an isolated incident. The authorities gave us one day to find them new homes; we pleaded and stretched it to a week. The eight young men had already left for Zimbabwe; their families had come and taken them home. I had watched as the last one got into a taxi with his father. The older man was shattered, his little one's face marred with scars. The young man was quiet. He lay his head on his father's lap and turned and gave us one tiny last wave. Left behind, were the families, the women with children, the old men and women.

In the week that followed, we all worked together to find solutions. UNHCR found new rental properties in safer townships for those who wanted to remain in Polokwane and covered rent for the first few months. IOM provided assistance and transportation for those who wanted to return home to Zimbabwe. MSF continued with their counselling and established focal points for future contact. An international NGO linked to the Musina network agreed to provide food for the first few months.

On the last day, the Municipality provided trucks to help the people move. As the stadium gate closed behind us, the last of the 'trespassers' out, cleaners emerged, armed with mops and buckets, poised to wipe the slate clean. I wished I could do the same with my mind. The exposed, seeping, bloody wounds of the young men, the stitches criss-crossing their skulls, their shoulders, their trembling young faces, were etched in my mind. I had heard from friends about how destabilizing it could be to work in such situations, but never experienced it myself. It was routine in refugee status determination interviews as well as other

interviews with asylum seekers and refugees to hear about violence they faced. But usually by the time we sat face to face, their wounds had healed, at least physically.

I told myself that my job had been to ensure the best assistance and solutions were provided. I wasn't tasked with their long-term safety, only their immediate care. I consoled myself that they were now with their families, being loved and cared for as they deserved. And each time I fretted, worrying how they would recover, I reminded myself that their recovery wasn't my responsibility. After several sleepless nights, angry and distraught, I shut down completely. In fact, I buried the memories so deep that when I woke up that morning in April, I thought at first the images belonged to someone else's nightmare. How I wished that were true.