



Simphiwe Nkwali

is this simply
xenophobia?
why such violence?
why now?

The burning man story

by Ray Hartley

The Sunday shift on 18 May was like no other we have had at *The Times*. Our reporters and photographers had fanned out over Gauteng early in the morning and by noon it was clear that something extraordinary, something terrible, was happening to foreigners from other African countries all over the greater Johannesburg area.

Soon reports and photographs began to make their way onto our news servers and we knew that we were dealing with a very big breaking story: The sporadic xenophobic attacks of the previous week had become an organised and sustained assault. And the brutality of the attacks appeared to be worse than in previous days.

Tens of thousands of foreigners were on the move to police stations and civic halls to seek refuge.

Then, in the late afternoon, pictures editor Robin Comley informed us that two of our photographers had captured the burning of a foreign resident – later identified as 35-year-old Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave of Mozambique – in the Ramaphosa informal settlement.

Halden Krog and Simphiwe Nkwali, both seasoned hard-news photographers, had held their nerve and taken a series of pictures that were very difficult to look at.

Nkwali was back in the office first. “I don’t know if you can handle this stuff,” he said. He looked shell-shocked and emotionally drained. He downloaded the pictures from his camera card onto our system and the editorial team gathered around to see what he had seen.

To say that the images were shocking is an understatement. We watched in a bizarre sort of frame-by-frame slow-motion as Nkwali went through the images leading up to those of the burning man.

Later on, we would do the same for Krog’s images. One of his pictures stood out. Through the flames, you could see the staring haunted eyes of a man at the very limits of existence. It cut through every emotional filter and moved me in a direct, visceral way that I had never experienced before. As a reporter more than a decade earlier I had seen burnt, shot and mutilated bodies during the violence of the early 1990s. Yet this image had more of an impact on me although I had not been present.

I was immediately conscious of the promise I had made to myself that *The Times* would be different to other daily newspapers, that it would seek out hope rather than dwelling on blood, gore and crime. We are a subscriber-based newspaper that goes into readers’ homes. Some children, whom we treasure as readers, would see this image. But I was also aware that we were staring the largest national emergency of the new South Africa in the face and that the nation needed to wake up to the true horror of what was happening in our midst.

There were some in the editorial team who were moved to tears by the picture. Their response was to say quietly: “This has got to stop”. I imagined that the readers would have the same reaction and that this image would once-and-for-all end the debate about whether or not we were in a crisis.

The team was in total agreement that we should publish the picture and

Flames of hate

Residents laugh as foreigner burns in his own blankets



HALDEN KROG
The Times photographer

AS WE made our way through the Ramaphosa squatter camp in Reiger Park on Gauteng’s East Rand, a woman’s words made us freeze in horror. “They are burning people down there,” she said.

I ran to the nearest police officer and said: “The locals say they’re burning a person at the other intersection.”

Officers leapt into a Casspir and a Nyalia, and drove through the debris and barricades in the road.

I ran after them, with other photographers following.

Two hundred metres down the road we found the first man. He had been severely beaten and was semi-conscious. Police thought he was dead, but later realised he wasn’t.

About 25m from him a man was on his knees. There was a mattress covering him, and it was on fire. He, too, was alight.



Police threw the mattress off him and kicked sand onto him to put out the flames. Another officer ran over with a fire extinguisher, pointed it at him and extinguished the flames. Other officers radioed for medical help.

The man was alive, but barely. He groaned, but he could not speak.



It was all over in 20 seconds. There was a concrete pillar lying near him, splattered with blood. We can only imagine what was done to him before he was set alight.

The police stayed with him until the paramedics arrived, doing what they could. But residents gathered at the scene were laughing.

Kim Ludbrook, a photographer, admonished them, and we reminded them this was human being and that what had happened was barbaric. Still they laughed.

The burn victim, whose name has not been released, died last night in hospital.

BARBARIC BEHAVIOUR: A Reiger Park resident struggles after being assaulted, covered with blankets and set alight by a rampaging mob, above. A police officer extinguishes the flames, far left, and another calls for medics, left. The man was rushed to Tambo Memorial Hospital with 100 percent burns. Doctors were unable to save him.
Pictures: HALDEN KROG

WATCH THE VIDEO

See more pictures and footage of the violence that plagued Gauteng yesterday; content may offend sensitive viewers
www.thetimes.co.za

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we placed it large on the front page under the headline: “Flames of hate”.

Being a fully-integrated multimedia newsroom, we decided to place the picture – and others – on our newly-launched multimedia portal.

Multimedia editor Carly Ritz worked in tandem with the editorial team, recording audio from Nkwali which became the soundtrack of a multimedia slideshow of photographs of the xenophobic violence also titled “Flames of hate”.

By Monday, our front page and the slideshow were dominating the national conversation. The online slide show would be viewed by a record audience for *The Times*, drawing international attention to the plight of foreigners in our country.

I have no doubt that the decision to publish the picture was the right one. Before its publication it was possible to deny the seriousness of the xenophobia crisis engulfing the country. This changed on that Monday as decision-makers and ordinary citizens woke up to the depths to which our fellow citizens had sunk.