

Local car dealership left in ruins after being torched, 58 cars destroyed

After losing 53 cars during xenophobic attacks in South Africa in 2019, Johannesburg car dealership owner Okey Uchendu never thought he would see his business destroyed again by civil unrest in less than two years.



A general view of a burning warehouse after violence erupted following the jailing of former South African President Jacob Zuma, in Durban, South Africa, 14 July 2021. Reuters/Rogan Ward

Already dealing with the impact of Covid-19 on the economy, Uchendu received a call at midnight on Sunday, 11 July, that his dealership was engulfed in flames as looting and violence, the worst in South Africa for years, escalated, wrecking hundreds of businesses.

"I'm speechless," the 45-year old told Reuters on Wednesday while standing next to 58 burnt cars. "I feel like committing suicide because my livelihood has been taken away from me. I was sitting crying, helpless because I can't do anything."

Among the severely burnt cars was an unrecognisable second hand Range Rover Evoque worth R220,000, which stood alongside low to high-end cars.

"All these things are gone. I don't even know where to start because how will I start. I still need to pay my rent, I've got three kids I need to take care of, how will I take care of my kids?" the visibly emotional Uchendu said.

Triggered by the jailing of ex-president Jacob Zuma last week after he failed to appear at a corruption inquiry, the unrest has widened into an outpouring of anger over poverty and inequality.

Many of South Africa's small, medium-sized and micro enterprises (SMME) are not insured, compounding any attempts of recovery of those damaged in the unrest.



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"We small businesses, nobody wants to insure us here in Jules Street, it's a high-risk area. When you call insurance, they say no this is a high-risk area," he said of his business that employed 16 people.

A survey done by the Small Business Institute (SBI), revealed last year that as many as 55,000 SMMEs may not make it through the Covid-19 pandemic. With the unrest, the number was expected to rise, SBI chief executive John Dlodlu told Reuters.

More than 200 malls have been looted or destroyed and over 600 stores burnt or damaged thus far, the South African Property Owners Association said on Wednesday.

The liquor industry said more than 200 liquor shops have been looted in Kwa-Zulu Natal and Gauteng provinces, which are the most affected by the unrest.

Bigger businesses like clothing retailer Mr Price were forced to temporarily shut hundreds of stores after being entirely looted, with some malls also shutting their doors.

"Investing in this particular property here, in this area, I'm out, I'm done," Uchendu said.

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