

# Xenophobic violence: reflections of a photographer

 Bylssa Sikiti da Silva 13 May 2009

The xenophobic violence that occurred in South Africa in May last year will surely be remembered as the most troubled period to grip the country since the dawn of democracy in 1994. A year later, Alon Skuy, *The Times* photographer who, with the agility of Hollywood's Steven Spielberg captured some memorable scenes on his camera, reflects on those moments and shares his thoughts with Bizcommunity.com.

“Some of the atrocities that I, along with many other photographers and citizens witnessed, did and still affect me to a certain degree,” Skuy (28) told Bizcommunity.com yesterday, Tuesday, 12 May 2009.

## “Empathy is a crucial part”



Photo courtesy of Alon Skuy.

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“Covering the violence helped to hit home the fact that empathy is a crucial part of the process, to create awareness about the events, and also to create awareness about the importance of tolerance towards fellow Africans,” he added.

On 11 May 2008, Alexandra, north of Johannesburg, erupted into a war zone where black South Africans savagely attacked African immigrants after accusing them of stealing their jobs, houses and women, being involved in crime and bringing Aids into the country.

The violence quickly spread to all corners of the country, resulting in gang-rape, looting, damage of property, killings and maiming just under the nose of helpless cops and ‘invisible’ political leaders.

The attacks prompted media watchdogs to point fingers at some local media, accusing them of inciting violence through what they called ‘xenophobic’ and unethical reporting.

Skuy said, “Any media coverage that incites violence in any way is extremely irresponsible. I did not come across articles inciting attacks, although they could have existed.”

## Challenges

Nonetheless, covering an event of such nature could well expose journalists to serious insecurity - injury, death or physical threat of any sort from enraged perpetrators.

Asked about the challenges he faced while working in that blood-soaked field, Skuy replied, “I faced the challenge of working under the pressure of deadlines but rarely any hostility from perpetrators of the attack

“I was threatened on one or two occasions not to get close to the mob, but generally I worked relatively freely under the circumstances.”

An exhibition of Skuy's memorable photographs from last year's xenophobic violence opened earlier this week on Monday 11 May, at the Constitution Hill in Braamfontein, Johannesburg.

### “Purpose of the exhibition”



Photo courtesy of Alon Skuy.

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“The purpose of the exhibition is to commemorate the attacks a year on, and to create awareness that attacks like what we witnessed last year should never happen again,” he said.

“I feel that educational campaigns need to be implemented geared at young and old alike to root out any prejudices or cruel behaviour towards any human being.”

Figures released by the National Prosecuting Authority show that 1647 people have since been arrested, resulting in more than 400 court cases and 70 guilty cases. The Consortium for Refugees and Migrants of South Africa (CoRMSA) has slammed the national government for being slow in implementing mechanism in place to prevent the repeat of such attacks in the future.

Walkabouts are available at the Constitution Hill (Room 4) to any interested parties regarding the images taken on the xenophobia until 31 July. Call Skuy on cell +27 (0)82 536 7719.

### ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer. [View my profile and articles...](#)

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