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Nothing is Happening in South Africa (Just Devastation)



Empty shelves in a grocery store due to panic buying during the 2021 South African unrest. Photograph Source: Aleksandar Bulovic' – [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

Huge swathes of South Africa are smouldering from days of rioting and looting. Some 27 million people have been going through the equivalent of a force 10 hurricane, yet judging

by the limited news coverage internationally, you wouldn't think so. It's not too much of a stretch to say there's been a near global media blackout.

The crisis has been going on since Friday 9th, and really took off on Monday. Indicative of how little international coverage there has been is that it took until Thursday for me to start receiving a smattering of messages asking if we are OK – “I heard something is going on...”

The contrast to Lebanon (where I lived for 17 years, until 2019) is incredible. Whenever there was a bomb or another security incident, I'd invariably get messages within minutes if not hours checking in.

Yes, South Africa's at the end of the world, but it's the continent's largest (or was) economy, with 59 million people. The country is on a knife's edge right now, particularly the two most populated provinces of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and Gauteng, which includes Johannesburg, and the location for the majority of rioting.

Over 200 malls, 800 shops and dozens of warehouses had been looted and in many cases burned to the ground by late Monday. Town centres have become burned husks. Farms have been destroyed, livestock stolen. 117 people have been killed so far. Operations at the fourth largest container terminal in the southern hemisphere, in Durban, and train freight have ground to a halt. Telecom towers were hit. The country's third largest oil refinery has closed. On Wednesday night alone there were 208 'incidents' in KZN and Gauteng. Food and fuel are now in short supply. There is talk of armed insurrection. The damage is in the billions of dollars.

Abroad, it's as if not much is happening in South Africa – “ah, Africans rioting again” seems to be the overall impression. Some of the titles imply that what's happening here is just a bit of 'unrest', if that – “South Africa is wandering from Mandela's Vision”. On the major news networks there's more news about the floods in Germany and Putin-Trump election meddling.

What has become clear is that the rioting is more than just calling for the release of former President Jacob Zuma, who turned himself in last week for contempt of court, sparking the crisis. Poverty and rage against the machine are of course drivers of the looting. But there are nefarious elements at work purposefully destabilising the country. Investigations have been started into 12 intelligence agents and cadres loyal to Zuma, including former special operations boss Thulani 'Silence' Dlomo.

Zuma, it should be recalled, was head of the ANC's intelligence department during the apartheid years, and his team know well how to organise mass demonstrations and foment unrest.

There are massive internal struggles within the ANC government, with Zuma's so-called Radical Economic Transformation faction demanding the former president's release and the overthrow of the president, Cyril Ramaphosa. Such internal struggles prevented the deployment of 75,000 troops, as the opposition wanted; as of Thursday, just 25,000 have been deployed.

Food and fuel trucks are under military escort to keep supply lines open on the country's main transport artery, the N3 highway, which runs from Durban to Johannesburg.

The army has come too late to have prevented the rampage. The underwhelming response of the South African Police Force (SAPs) to the rioting is indicative of not only their low numbers (less than 200,000) and resources but in cases a lack of willingness to take on rioters, in part because of orders from elements that are pro-Zuma.

In a town near to where we live, Howick, with a population of 21,000, there were just eight cops on duty when thousands of looters descended on the centre. Civilians had to band together to defend the town, firing off thousands of rounds. In Durban and areas where thousands of looters went after malls and shopping centres, the SAPs were running out of rubber bullets and then live rounds.

People feel they have been abandoned by the state. Vigilante justice has surfaced. Across KwaZulu-Natal, civilians are manning checkpoints (in our town it is eight unarmed civilians, to two armed per checkpoint), with some backup from the police and the country's over-sized private security companies – two and a half times that of the police, at 500,000. Everyone with an weapon is carrying it or keeping it close to hand. Communities have banded together – of all races – to defend their neighbourhoods, businesses and property.

The talk now is of attacks on gun stores, and that some 1.5 million rounds of ammo were looted from Durban port. If that is true and the ammo gets into the wrong hands, an armed insurrection could just be around the corner. In any case, there are plenty of guns and ammo around. Local farmers say they have expected something to happen for a long time, with many stockpiling thousands of rounds of ammo per farm.

Contributing to the overall crisis is the legacy of apartheid, and decades of misrule and corruption, for which Zuma was being investigated during his nine year as president. The

country also has the highest inequality in the world – youth unemployment is 75% – which has only gotten worse over the past year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

If the situation is able to stabilise in the coming days, the immediate challenge is to ensure food, fuel, medicine and other essential supplies start being distributed or hunger will spread, the pandemic will run rampant (the country was put back to Level 4 restrictions a few weeks ago due to the spread of the Delta variant), and more trouble will be afoot.

As the novelist Alan Patton, from Pietermaritzburg, the provincial capital of KwaZulu-Natal just down the road from me, entitled his renowned anti-apartheid novel, Cry, the Beloved Country.

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