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## South Africa: Looting Talk, “the Nonsense” and Queuing for COVID Jabs



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In the days after the looting, volunteers came out to clean up the damage, sweeping up the broken glass, the detritus, and the spent bullets and shotgun shells. Bodies were being pulled out of rivers, from ditches, and elsewhere as the death toll reached over 300.

“We swept up so many bullets, in places the ground was covered in them; I’ve never seen anything like this in my life,” said a middle-aged Zimbabwean man I was queuing up with to get a COVID jab at the Royal Agricultural Showgrounds in downtown Pietermaritzburg, aka PMB, the provincial capital of KwaZulu-Natal.

People were scared to go out the week after “all the nonsense”, as I’ve heard the week of rioting and looting repeatedly referred to. But some less timid souls ventured out to get vaccinated, taking advantage of the minimal waiting times as the country, despite all the turmoil, pushes ahead with its open-to-all “VacciNation” campaign.

Such public activities, like getting vaccinated and voting, are among the few times South Africans and residents genuinely get to mix with people from all walks of life. A time when the country truly seems the so-called rainbow nation, as the indigenous, the Europeans, and the Asians all queue together, and talk together. This was most apparent in the waiting area once you had been vaccinated, with everyone handing over their COVID-19 vaccine card for health workers to fill in. A man collected up the cards, and read out names – Zulu names, Muslim names, Indian names, and European names. There was laughter as he mispronounced names, or didn’t even try, like mine. “Mr Paul, er...” “Yes, that’s me.”

As we queued up to get the jab I talked with the Zimbabwean. He had lived in South Africa for several years to earn money to send home due to the 80% depreciation of Zimbabwe’s currency. He had tried to convince two fellow citizens that lived in a small house in the garden of the shared house he lived in to not go and loot. “I told them not to do it, that neighbours would see them, but they went, first to get beer, and then several other times, coming back with piles of clothes and other things. They didn’t even hide the loot in bags,” he said.

When the time came to clean up, he decided he’d go into PMB to take part, and tried to convince the two fellows to do the same. “‘The Zulus will beat you, don’t go,’ they said, but when I told people I’m Zimbabwean, people were happy to hear that. A shop owner took my phone number.”

Sourcing food had been a struggle for him and the dozen others he shares a house with – there are two families occupying a room each. But some of the supermarkets in the city had been well-protected, and were soon re-stocked, easing his concerns.

The situation was harder in the township of Edendale – an unfortunate name given by missionaries, for it is far from being the Eden it once was, being in other parlance a shanty town, favela, or slum of over 140,000 people – on the outskirts of PMB.

Two shopping complexes there were heavily looted and burned, including, bizarrely, a funeral parlour. “We will now have to go into the city to buy food,” said a lady from Edendale lining up for her jab. This would involve taking a taxi van for about a US dollar each way, and then a half hour walk home laden with groceries. She earns just over \$10 a day as a cleaner.

Her neighbour’s 11-year old son was shot dead when he accompanied his father during the looting. She showed a photo on her phone of the young lad, smiling sweetly in his school tie.

In her forties (vaccinations are currently for those over 35), she is her family’s main bread winner, looking after her grown up children, her late sister’s children, and her own younger kids. The elder children are not working, part of the 75% of the unemployed youth, having lost their jobs along with an estimated 3 million others last year during the two month hard lockdown and its aftermath. “My 20 year old son has been recovering from an operation after he was poisoned after getting into a fight at a party,” she said shaking her head.

In the plastic seat next to mine, as we sat outside until we were ushered into a cavernous hall that a year ago had been a COVID-19 field hospital for the overflowing Gray’s Hospital nearby, was a white lady, the owner of a launderette in the city. I asked if her business was damaged. “No, just some windows smashed in; the door locks held,” she said.

Her launderette cleaned Gray’s dirty laundry. “They took pot shots at the van bringing the laundry, can you believe it?” She was getting vaccinated as her staff of middle-aged ladies would only do so once she had been jabbed.

During the looting she had kept some ready cash available, as ATMs had either been looted or run out of money. “That quickly ran out as I was buying food for all my staff.” Her firm’s “main competition, but not really competition,” had been destroyed when the nearby Makro hyper-store had been looted and burned. “They employed 300 people. I am getting people asking for work, but I can’t take on any more, and I can’t scale up, industrial washing machines are expensive, over ZAR200,000 (\$13,400) each.”

As we entered the vaccination hall, playing musical chairs as we moved forward in the line, an Indian South African asked to sit next to his wife. I jokingly asked if he was

scared of needles and needed his wife to hold his hand. “Oh no. I’m not scared. Last week we could have died,” he said. Was it bad in his neighbourhood? “We didn’t sleep for days manning the checkpoints.”

Make-shift checkpoints remained for days after the looting stopped in many parts of the two worst hit provinces, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. There was fear the instability would reoccur, as rumours of further attacks circulated. Where I live, in a farming community, external contractors and day labourers were only re-allowed 10 days after the looting ended. “We were concerned about a Trojan horse type attack. We don’t want to fight on two fronts,” said a private security contractor hired by the community.

As the queue for the job inched forward, I talked with the laundrette about the lack of international coverage. “My cousins, in the US, had no idea. My son in New Zealand didn’t know about it for days,” she said. I had experienced the same, as related in my [Counterpunch article](#).

There seemed to be minimal comprehension of the true scale of the devastation – the more than 800 stores looted and 100 burnt, and over 200 entire shopping centres looted in the week 12-16 July. On one hand, it was simplistically viewed as yet another example of Africans looting. For others, it was to be viewed as a sign of the poor standing up, looting chain stores and American fast-food chains like McDonalds and other symbols of consumer capitalism.

Yet what must not be overlooked is that the looting of a mall in Europe or many parts of the USA has different connotations to here. People depend on shopping centres due to the lack of facilities outside of towns and cities, with rural dwellers driving from afar to stock up, while the urban geographies of apartheid divided-up areas according to race. There are shopping centres for each area, and the crime rate has led to the ghetto-isation of urban centres with malls and shopping centres considered safer.

So when shopping centres were burned to the ground, bang went the jobs these centres provided but more importantly, the food sources for thousands of people, or in the case of Edendale, tens of thousands.

The figures are still coming in about the scale of destruction, but one estimate is that losses to stock, damage to property and lost exports is around \$4 billion. Jobs losses are put at more than 150,000.

As several media publications titles have now asked, was the looting prompted by the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma an “Insurrection or Insurgency?”

In short it was both. This was apparent in some of the graffiti scrawled on the walls of PMB: “Eat the rich”. “F\*\*k Zuma”. “F\*\*k the ANC”. “Level 4 to hell” (in reference to pandemic restrictions, such as the booze ban during the third wave – South Africa has yo-yoed between the strict stay at home lockdown of Level 5, to Level 2, of minimal restrictions).

All the issues that led to the days of looting are still here, and chaos may once again occur unless the chronic systemic issues are tackled. The “nonsense”, as it is disparagingly called by some, cannot be ignored. And the danger of more militaristic solutions should not be considered, as some more reactionary elements have called for, to “exterminate the brutes” involved in the looting, echoing the mindset Raoul Peck depicts so well in his documentary series.

Yet amid a pandemic and a global recession, time is not on anyone’s side. The ticking time bomb of mass unemployment, inequality, and disenfranchisement remains.

It is a challenge that has long faced South Africa but also many, too many, other places in the world. At a macro level, however, the super wealthy seem ready to escape this world. As Gil Scott-Heron sang in his 1970 song “Whitey on the Moon” – “With all that money I made last year, For Whitey on the moon, How come I ain’t got no money here? Hmm, Whitey’s on the moon.”

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