



Refugee Digest 96

September 2025

Migrants, Refugees and Displaced Persons

Over the past few weeks across the globe, governments have ramped up their responses to issues of migration as anti-immigration forces have gained the centre stage of politics and forced such responses. There are some who are calling it the era of 'Enforcement Above All Else.'

Recently the Migration Policy Institute posted the following paragraph, which in many ways underlines the heart of the increasingly acrimonious debate around immigration in all its variations and the hostile responses to migration issues that are increasingly seen as normal, as well as increasingly becoming policy considerations. Part of the importance of this paragraph is that it makes the link between migration and its impact on trust in democracy and democratic institutions.

"Public trust in migration systems and in democracy more broadly – is eroding. As rapid demographic shifts fuel anxieties in many communities, governments are feeling the pressure and responding with increasingly restrictive policies – scaling back immigration, imposing stricter integration requirements, and narrowing pathways to long-term residency and citizenship. Will these sweeping, highly visible policies designed to signal control meaningfully address the real pressures communities face and restore trust in the democratic institutions charged with governing migration?"

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/events/immigration-democracy-rebuilding-trust-europe?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=88646ffa-7b66-45eb-ab23-6070e4ff1f0b>

We see, for example, in the UK that a poll conducted amongst a cross section of voters showed that 58 per cent indicated that immigration posed the greatest concern for them, with 51 per cent citing the economy. Growing protests against asylum hotels and assistance programs have rendered this a very publicly divisive issue in many communities, with serious consequences for social cohesion.

<https://news.sky.com/story/immigration-becomes-voters-top-issue-for-first-time-since-brexit-13427783>

As a result, in large part due to public pressure, the UK produced a White Paper which contained some of the core indicators pointed out in the MPI paragraph above. This provides another example of how combinations of populism, nationalism, xenophobia and political uncertainty have a direct influence on policy options.

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10267/>

In the USA, President Trump has taken some extraordinary steps to ensure the deportation of undocumented foreigners, ranging from the deployment of the National Guard in deportation activities to an amount of \$170 billion being set aside in the 'Big Beautiful Bill' for immigration enforcement. There have also been actions aimed at cutting benefits of non-citizens legally present in the USA. This has produced a large-scale culture of fear and suspicion amongst different groups – variously documented people residing in the USA; those awaiting adjudication; and those waiting to apply for documents.

<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/report/mass-deportation-trump-democracy/>

<https://afsc.org/news/trumps-executive-orders-immigration-explained>

In trying to ascertain just how governments around the world are seeking to address some of these vexing issues, the following article from December 2024 tries to assess South Africa's GNU in terms of

developing a common policy perspective from the different parties represented in the GNU.

<https://www.protectionweb.co.za/border-security/south-africas-gnu-faces-an-uphill-battle-on-migration-policy/>

In the face of a groundswell of more restrictive and exclusive anti-migrant language, Prof Helena Barnard of the University of Pretoria spoke of the need for a rethink on how we talk about migration. She pointed out that the increased diversity that comes from migration creates new tensions, even while it drives innovation. It also unsettles communities. She went on to say that communities are threatened by the way migrants challenge social and cultural assumptions, especially in local communities that are already vulnerable. Her key point in urging new ways of considering undocumented migrants, and the language we use with regard to them, is that there is a negative understanding or assumption that all undocumented migrants are trying to bypass the formal systems and requirements. Prof Barnard says that they should instead be recognised as people trying to navigate opaque systems and arbitrary bureaucratic structures. Being undocumented rarely means operating outside the system. In most cases it means being trapped in a broken system. This would remove the assumption and prejudicial language of illegality, competitiveness, dishonesty and 'status by stealth', which currently defines our conceptual and policy thinking. It would allow a healthier vocabulary to emerge.

https://www.up.ac.za/news/post_3340406-time-for-a-rethink-on-how-we-speak-about-migration-gibss-prof-helena-barnard-says-during-35th-up-expert-lecture

Gauteng Premier Panyazo Lesufi told a number of Parliamentary Committees that the province had no way of dealing with the increasing numbers of undocumented foreigners living there. He claimed they needed an intervention from Parliament to help find ways of offering services to this demographic, as well to as recoup finances that are presently being used on them, and which are needed for services to the wider community. Unfortunately, he also linked the rise in numbers to a rise in crime, which can be misleading if presented out of context.

https://iol.co.za/news/south-africa/2025-09-04-lesufi-urges-parliament-intervention-says-gauteng-has-too-many-undocumented-foreign-nationals/#google_vignette

On 9th September, the Mayors of Johannesburg and Tshwane commented that at the U20 summit (the meeting of Mayors from the G20 countries) they would raise issues around migration and speak with Mayors from other African countries to seek ways of jointly improving the cities from which most migrants are drawn, and thus help reduce the number of migrants from those cities.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CHyTru9fxjA>

The Minister of Home Affairs confirmed that 51 000 illegal immigrants have been deported since the formation of the Government of National Unity. The Minister said that greater use of technology has assisted this process, and added that South Africa's leaky borders were a result of thirty years of under-investment and diminishing security. This constitutes the highest number of deportees over the past five years.

<https://www.citizen.co.za/news/over-51-000-illegals-deported-since-sas-gnu-came-to-power/>

Following the spike in xenophobic activities around state health facilities and the heightened narrative around illegal foreigners being responsible for shortages at such facilities, the Minister of Health made a very clear statement. He said that the DoH does not segregate or discriminate between undocumented and documented patients seeking access to health facilities. This follows the requirements of the Constitution. He said that shortages were due to budget cuts, lack of personnel, and infrastructural challenges.

<https://www.news24.com/politics/health-dept-doesnt-check-if-patients-seeking-care-at-hospitals-are-undocumented-motsoaledi-20250825-0731>

In all fairness, the Minister should also have mentioned the waste, corruption and inefficiency that plagues the Department of Health. This is a key source of shortages and might well be a better focus for activists who wish to see better use of resources.

<https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/corruption-in-the-healthcare-sector-can-take-a-deadly-toll/>

Sadly, this focus throws into sharp relief the increasing vulnerability of people on the move and the heightened efforts to deal with migration issues in ways that often by-pass human rights imperatives, and which lean sharply on the politics of exclusion.

Peter-John Pearson

Director

pearson@iafrica.com