



Refugee Digest 98

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Migrants, Refugees and Displaced Persons

This Digest focuses on the 2026 State of the Nation Address, with special regard to issues around foreign nationals, immigration, and undocumented persons, as mentioned by the President and in the various reactions by other political parties and groups to the framing of these contested issues.

In his address, President Ramaphosa sought to achieve a balance between the protection of human rights, the enforcement of immigration laws, and the management of public resources. He was clear on the issue of protecting foreign nationals in South Africa and ensuring their access to facilities, while also ensuring that South African labour laws and border controls are complied with. “We will not tolerate violence and other acts of lawlessness directed at foreign nationals. No foreign national should be unlawfully barred from accessing public facilities, including schools and health facilities.” He was also clear that border controls would be stepped up. “Funding to strengthen border security will be prioritised, covering infrastructure, technology and people. Key border posts will be redeveloped through public-private partnerships and we will extend the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) to all international airports and the busiest land ports of entry.” He added that “the police, Home Affairs and labour inspectors will work together to crack down on violations of existing immigration, labour and other laws”, and insisted that “the laws of our country must be observed by everyone.”

With regard to the contested area of employment, the President went on to say, “government will ensure that employers that hire foreign nationals without the required visas face the full might of the law. To tighten enforcement, government will hire an additional 10 000 labour inspectors this year.”

<https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/state-nation-address-president-cyril-ramaphosa-1>

The legal firm Cliffe Dekker Hofmeyer issued a useful summary of the speech’s points with regard to employment, foreign nationals, and economic migrants.

<https://www.cliffedekkerhofmeyr.com/en/news/publications/2026/South-Africa/Immigration-Law/immigration-law-alert-16-february-South-Africas-immigration-policy-outlook-for-2026>

Just prior to the speech, the DA named areas, especially with regard to border control, visa backlogs and ETA’s, which they hoped would be highlighted in SONA. Several of these issues were mentioned by the President.

<https://www.da.org.za/2026/02/home-affairs-wins-expected-in-sona-2026>

In a response to SONA, Labour Minister Nomakhozazana Meth welcomed the ongoing efforts to manage the influx of undocumented economic migrants. She added that her department was already engaged with other government departments such as Home Affairs and SAPS to address undocumented employment and related issues. She reiterated that amongst the measures the department wished to implement was the proposal to ring-fence certain sectors wholly or partially for the employment of South Africans, and to prescribe employment quotas for foreign nationals in specific sectors.

<https://www.labour.gov.za/departments-of-employment-and-labour-welcomes-the-president%E2%80%99s-sona-focus-on-jobs-enforcement-and-inclusive-economic-growth>

ActionSA's Lerato Ngobeni commented: "We are hoping whatever he has said in that speech, including the issue of dealing with illegal immigration, will be a serious one." She criticised Ramaphosa for "pouring cold water" on the impact of illegal immigrants in the country. "It creates a vacuum which has been occupied by those who are now being labelled vigilantes. Citizens are occupying a space that has been left by the State, and we don't want to see that. We want a country that is functional and peaceful."

<https://www.enca.com/top-stories/sona-2026-political-parties-call-more-action>

The Daily Maverick's analyst wrote: "On immigration, the speech delivered what was by some margin the most muscular language on immigration of any SONA this decade. Ten thousand additional labour inspectors. Drones along the border. Public-private partnerships to redevelop key ports of entry. And, most pointedly, 'Employers that hire foreign nationals without the required visas will face the full might of the law.' It's a far cry from the more conciliatory immigration rhetoric of previous years."

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-02-13-a-sona-for-almost-all-ramaphosas-masterclass-in-political-crowdpleasing/>

IFP leader Velenkosini Hlabisa noted the following: "Honourable President, there is another leak that we must fix, and that is the leak of economic and social resources through unchecked illegal migration. The IFP classifies the pervasive presence of undocumented foreign nationals as a threat to State security. While we support migration through legal, regulated channels, we stand firm against uncontrolled, illegal migration. A package of immediate law reforms is necessary to preserve jobs for South Africans, reserve the spaza shop industry for locals, and stop the abuse of our healthcare, housing and other sectors by those who are in our country illegally."

<https://ifp.org.za/newsroom/debate-on-the-2026-state-of-the-nation-address/>

Outside the Cape Town City Hall, where the 2026 SONA was being delivered, members of Operation Dudula staged a protest, claiming that the President's speech was far removed from the daily realities of the people and that the presence and economic activities of undocumented migrants worsened the situation.

<https://www.sn124.com/dailysun/news/elections/operation-dudula-protests-against-president-ramaphosa-during-sona-over-illegal-immigration-and-poor-communities-20260212>

In a thinly veiled reference to the Minister of Sports, Arts and Culture, Gayton McKenzie, the EFF leader, Julius Malema, condemned those who came into Parliament on the back of xenophobic sentiments and attitudes that allowed xenophobes to act with impunity. He called on the President to denounce such xenophobia, and to distance himself from the Minister's xenophobic utterances.

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

It seems clear from this survey that the ideological variance indicated in the responses to SONA falls somewhere between a minimum of respect for human dignity and Constitutional guarantees, on the one hand, and a downright rejection of any space for the implementation of more inclusive approaches on the other. This is a more populist approach, and indications show that the latter is gaining ground while the middle ground is diminishing. We should be on our guard against this approach becoming the hegemonic policy position.

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