

REPORT

During the Apartheid Era, South Africa was a pariah state among other African nations and had few diplomatic and trade links with the rest of the continent. But since the new democracy (1990), South Africa's status in Africa changed dramatically. It also saw an influx of refugees, asylum seekers and foreigners into the country.

What were the motivating factors for this sudden influx and how do the local people respond to having foreigners as neighbours, colleagues at work or friends for that matter?

Refugees seeking better working conditions and a 'peaceful life' in South Africa are mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

South Africa seems to be a preferred destination since it has the most developed economy in the Sub-Saharan Africa and foreigners seem to get easy access in to the country. The Congolese refugees favour South Africa because of its growing economic climate, job opportunities and relative atmosphere of peace and safety. Despite the crime rate, it is a haven compared to the war - torn DRC. Most of the Congolese refugees are middle - class and are well - educated. Many of them are professionals, for example, doctors and skilled people and it is precisely these people rather than the poor who migrate to other countries. Many of them become car guards, gardeners, traders etc., before finding jobs suited to their skills. The story of Congolese migration to South Africa is a characteristic story of young people poised to take their place in society, having the rug pulled out from under their feet and finding themselves having to fend for themselves in a foreign land. One car guard I interviewed refused to be photographed in his uniform because he felt it was beneath his station. (He is a doctor). While some are happy to plough their way towards surviving, others hope to collect their hard - earned cash and someday return home to their family and friends.

South Africans, on the other hand have their own perceptions of refugees and foreigners. Many see them as usurpers of jobs and opportunities and while they agree that certain rights, like housing, safety and sanitation should be granted to them whether wholly or within limits, they agree also agree that refugees and foreigners should socially distinct from the local people.

The South African government is seen as weak and permissive since its democracy, for allowing many foreigners in to the country. According to most South Africans it is the main cause of crime and vagrancy which is rife in the country. The laws concerning refugees should be stricter, as one respondent suggests we follow the American policy of a refugee ID document. One respondent suggests that the desperate nature of refugees to survive leads them to becoming criminals even if they were not criminals in their own country.

Despite locals wary attitude towards refugees, they are willing to extend basic human rights to them and hope that they would contribute meaningfully to the country. It seems that despite discrimination , abuse and stereotyping, most refugees and foreigners are set on making a success of their way forward, but this depends largely on which countries are willing to take this awesome responsibility.

