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MEDIA STATEMENT

RE: IS IT XENOPHOBIA, OR THE WEEPING SOULS OF THE VULNERABLE AND HOPELESS

DATE: 16/05/2008

The Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation (ESSET) has observed with disbelief to the unfolding incidents of xenophobia and criminal elements in Alexandra in the past few days and now spreading to other local areas.

ESSET, as an ecumenical advocacy agency affiliated to the South African Council of Churches (SACC) found it pity that the residents of Alexandra viciously set about to attack defenceless immigrants who had found temporary dwelling in their township. It is a well-known fact that scores of these foreigners fled from their respective countries due to political commotion while many others did so as a result of poverty and dejected economic state of affairs. We found these foreigners in almost all provinces of our country trying to make ends meet.

If the situation were to be reversed, we would have loved to see residents of Alexandra showing humanity and moral responsibility to their fellow Africans, in line with the South African cultural principles and values of Ubuntu. It is distressing to recall that in contrast during the apartheid era, many of our political activists were welcomed and treated humanely by fellow Africans in their own countries. In South African culture, there is a traditional saying that 'a person is a person because of other people'. Conversely, it was saddening to learn how women were reportedly raped; fellow South Africans in Alexandra disposed of their households and innocent people violently attacked.

Nevertheless, judging by the intensity attacks meted to the foreigners, we are made to picture beyond linking the incidents in Alexandra to xenophobia and crime only. ESSET is of the view that the core basis of the merciless conduct demonstrated by the residents of Alexandra stems from among others the following aspects;

- ✓ Failure by government to fast track basic services to its communities
- ✓ Failure to develop appropriate socio-economic policies that is inclusive of the interest of the poorest of poor.
- ✓ The ever-increasing food and fuel prices
- ✓ High rate of unemployment
- ✓ Failure by the South African Development Communities (SADC) to deal with pertinent issues with the region, with particular emphasis on the development of political situation in Zimbabwe.

Moreover, we assume that this tight-fisted behaviour started in Alexandria is one way in which the communities display their vulnerability and despair in government. It reflects their agony of having to deal with socio-economic challenges such as being unemployed and as a result rising up each day looking forward to at least putting bread on the table for themselves and their families. In addition, it has come to our understanding that the real element of xenophobia stems from anger of the unfulfilled promises of the poverty stricken residents who have doubts that the government would ultimately ameliorate their gloomily socio-economic conditions and at the same time cater for the needs of foreigners with whom now they have to share their spaces and resources.

It is inopportune that the residents of Alexandria tried to demonstrate their needs for improved life from government through protesting for the tolerance of foreigners in their localities. This at the end had negative repercussions, which instead saw incidents of criminal elements and xenophobia dominating the good intentions they initially had of raising their weeping voices caused by the socio-economic challenges they have to put brave faces to on daily basis.

As was the case with the protests for improved service delivery in the country in the past year, we are made to conclude that the incidents at Alexandria is but one signal of a percent of our communities who feel the pinch as a result of the recent trends of increases on almost everything; food prices, fuel prices, unemployment, interest rates, electricity, influx of foreigners, cost of living etc.

Issued by the Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation (ESSET)

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping, fluid strokes that form a stylized, somewhat abstract shape.