

Brenthurst Media Articles: News Release [122256]

Foreigners the lifeblood of successful countries

The police siren was the signal for the traders to gather their goods and scarper. The intersection at the corner of Paradise Road and Newlands Avenue in Cape Town is a haven for Zimbabweans and others peddling their wares.

The pace at which they disappeared into the nearby forest was testament to them knowing the fate that awaited them if they were caught.

The sight reminded me of a conversation I once had with the crew of a charter aircraft operating from Blantyre, Malawi. A crew member noted that their regular business was repatriating illegal "aliens" from South Africa. "The funny thing is," he said, "most of them say 'see you in a few weeks' when they get off the aircraft."

Forget the futility of these operations. Forget the irony of the rhetoric about African unity and ubuntu in light of this District 9-type xenophobia - and of the undoubted benefits immigrants' countries of origin reap.

But one cannot overlook the contribution migrants make to the societies they join. They often work harder for less and are usually highly motivated, which is why they got up to go in the first place. The great power of the US has been built on the energy and skill of migrants.

Elsewhere, as part of a deliberate attempt to encourage the flow of skills since 1945, seven million people have migrated to Australia.

Closer to home, think of the disproportionate contribution that Basotho migrants or the Jewish population have made to South Africa's economy. In the 35 years from 1880 the number of Jews increased tenfold to 40000.

The Jewish community, at its peak about 150000 people strong, has made an inestimable contribution to our corporate and political life.

Apartheid has complicated the view of immigrants. But would the majority have preferred such entrepreneurs to go elsewhere rather than build businesses here, even though they (indirectly) supported a racist government?

In an era in which multiculturalism is not only preached, but seen as a great strategic asset to societies, many states in Africa appear to be moving in the opposite direction.

Far from being perceived as contributing energy and skills and improving competitiveness, immigrants are viewed as stealing jobs.

Perhaps this is understandable where jobs are scarce and in African states that comprise many nationalities. But instead of expending energy chasing migrants from traffic lights, South Africa should be thinking about how to attract skills and put immigration services in place.