

SOUTH AFRICA

## DEEP DIVE (PART ONE)

### Inside Joburg's building of darkness, where migrants live in fear as Operation Dudula threats amplify



*The derelict building in inner-city Johannesburg. (Photo: Daily Maverick)*

By Daily Maverick Reporters

22 Aug 2022

Operation Dudula sprang up a year ago as a 'South Africa first' grouping and quickly launched campaigns targeting immigrants. In this article, we look at the impact of a threatened operation by Operation Dudula to evict occupants from a derelict building in inner-city Johannesburg. The threat has left more than 400 people — including people living with disabilities — in fear of attacks and deportations. Some have already packed up and fled.

---

“We thank God that Operation Dudula could not come last weekend. But, to be frank, enough people have not been sleeping, our hearts are throbbing. We have been cracking our heads that at any given time we can find the building being surrounded by these dangerous people.”

These were the words of Tendai Muchenje\*, an occupant in one of Johannesburg’s “abandoned” or “hijacked” buildings which have been targeted by Operation Dudula, an anti-immigration group that sprang up in and around Soweto a year ago and has been accused of fuelling xenophobic sentiments.



Illegal electricity connections inside Joburg’s building of darkness. (Photo: Daily Maverick)



The narrow passage inside the run-down building. (Photo: Daily Maverick)

Muchenje (48), who is visually impaired, is a father of three who hails from Zimbabwe. He is a representative of Zimbabwe People with Disabilities Living in South Africa

On August 8, Operation Dudula served occupants in the building where Muchenje lives with an “eviction notice”, telling them they had to leave within five days.

Most occupants have been living in the building since 2009 and were relocated there after the xenophobic attacks of 2008. It is one of more than 700 buildings that the city has identified as abandoned or hijacked.

The building houses more than 400 people and most of them are people living with disabilities, some are visually impaired and others are wheelchair-bound.

Inside, makeshift boards and curtains divide up the space where the occupants live, most of whom are Zimbabweans. They rely on illegal electrical connections for power and get their water from a JoJo tank which often runs out. There are no toilets in the building and occupants pay R2 to use public toilets outside the building or in the nearest garages. At night they must pay R10 to use the toilets opposite the building.

The letter from Dudula reads: “To the Occupants: This letter is served to all the people who are illegally occupying this building. We have communicated with the owner of this building and had an understanding that we can’t have illegal immigrants in this building. We also have a

concern that there is a high level of crime that is committed by the same people who are currently occupying the premises. We are giving you five days to vacate this building and failure to adhere to this request we have no choice but to use all necessary measures at hand to remove you.”

Operation Dudula members have, over the past several months, been issuing eviction notices to foreign-owned or run shops in Orange Grove, Yeoville and other areas in Johannesburg.

### **Reclaim and campaigning**

The DA-led City of Joburg administration is in an ongoing process of reclaiming hijacked or abandoned properties across the city in a bid to ensure that they can meaningfully participate in Johannesburg’s economy and are returned to the hands of the original owners.

Operation Dudula has been staging “clean-up” marches through Johannesburg including the evictions of immigrants from houses and the abandoned or hijacked buildings where they have found refuge. These campaigns have led to the sporadic looting of migrant-owned shops and the eviction of some residents.

Sifiso Nkosi of Operation Dudula’s Jeppe branch said they want to evict the occupants of the building because the owner wants it back, and also because illegal activities are being carried out there.

Nkosi said one occupant was leading a syndicate of human trafficking from the building. “He is managing his illegal business of human trafficking by using people living with disabilities whom he transported from Zimbabwe. He makes them go out and beg in the streets and then collects the money and makes them pay rent in the dilapidated building,” Nkosi claimed.

He claimed the man had “approached us and tried to bribe us with R3,000 to help him and other occupants not be evicted and when we refused, he hired an inkabi [hitman] for protection”.

He said that Operation Dudula wanted “illegal occupants out of the building and out of South Africa, so that the owner has his building back, and repairs it because it is way too dilapidated for inhabitants and can collapse at any time, and then we will have our South Africa back.”

However, residents of the building denied allegations of criminal activities and said that Operation Dudula was trying to find an excuse to evict them.



A water pipe that is connected to a Jojo tank, which is the only source of water in the building, hangs from a window pane. (Photo: Daily Maverick)



Residents of the building have to endure the stench of a dump. (Photo: Daily Maverick)



The building in which immigrants live a precarious existence in inner-city Johannesburg. (Photo: Daily Maverick)

### **Not so fast**

The Legal Resources Centre (LRC) attorneys who are representing the occupants have ordered Operation Dudula to refrain from harassing and intimidating their clients.

“Our clients contacted us and raised our eyebrows again with regards to this Operation Dudula. There is a court order in place. Operation Dudula cannot approach the occupants or threaten them. Last week, I put together a letter that the occupants can present to Dudula should they decide to come. But we also need to touch base with the owner of the building to pave the way forward for these occupiers to curb the illegal threats of eviction from happening now and again. Ultimately, the court will direct us on what needs to happen now as the matter is still in court,” an LRC representative told Daily Maverick.

The LRC representative did not want to be named for fear of being targeted in the same way as lawyers at the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (Seri) were, or of being blamed for preventing the refurbishment of abandoned buildings as the then mayor Herman Mashaba did five years ago.

Seri's executive director, Nomzamo Zondo, said that Operation Dudula cannot lawfully request that the occupiers vacate their homes.

"This letter is clearly an attempt to intimidate the occupiers out of their homes with the consent or support of the owner who is aware of pending legal proceedings. My advice would be for the occupiers to lay criminal charges of intimidation and seek an interdict against Dudula and those whose names appear on the notice.

"Should Dudula execute their threats, that would also be criminal as the Prevention of Illegal Eviction from and Unlawful Occupation of Land Act prohibits evictions without a court order and makes it an offence to evict someone outside the authority of an eviction order," said Zondo.

One of the occupants of the building told Daily Maverick that Operation Dudula had not acted on the eviction letter notice.

"We are just suspecting that it's either they have admitted our request that we should stay for two more months without any harassment from them or else they have respected or were made afraid by the court order. But this is only temporary," he said.

Operation Dudula's Nkosi said they had not proceeded with the eviction because they were still deliberating with the owner of the building and other entities including the SA Police Service, Johannesburg metro police, the Department of Home Affairs and the Zimbabwean embassy.

"We are speaking to various departments and the owner to see how we can peacefully evict these people — not for them to be homeless in the South African streets but for those living with disabilities to be transported home and those who are able-bodied also make their plans to get home. But one way or the other they will be evicted."

Responding generally to Operation Dudula's campaigns, the City of Joburg distanced itself from any eviction operation that did not operate within a legal framework – which required investigations and orders of the court.



Makeshift boards and curtains divide up the space for more than 400 families. (Photo: Daily Maverick)



A woman enters the dark building. (Photo: Daily Maverick)

Home Affairs Minister Aaron Motsoaledi has also denied that they work with Operation Dudula as the department has its own inspectorate that deals with the issue of illegal foreign nationals.

This year, the Zimbabwean embassy raised concerns about threats to its citizens based in South Africa.

“In these instances, nationals reportedly received threats of unspecified action, including forced eviction, if they did not leave the country by a certain date. The embassy and the consulates are aware of the anxiety brought by the non-renewal of the Zimbabwe Exemption Permits and their termination on 31 December 2020.

“All Zimbabwean citizens living in South Africa should be vigilant and law-abiding. Holders of the Zimbabwe Exemption Permits who choose to remain in the country after 31 December 2022 must start the process of migrating to other visas early. Relevant information is on the website of the Department of Home Affairs,” said Zimbabwe’s ambassador to South Africa, David Hamadziripi.

During his term as mayor of Johannesburg, Mashaba, now the leader of ActionSA, tried to clear Joburg’s hijacked and abandoned buildings of their occupants, including the building in question; however, many of these buildings are still occupied. They have fallen into a state of disrepair and are without electricity, water or proper sanitation.

They have become homes to vulnerable immigrants from all over the globe, with the majority from Zimbabwe, who have come to seek refuge in South Africa.

Since late 2021, attacks on foreign nationals have increased in South Africa, including in Alexandra and Diepsloot, according to reports.

With the Covid-19 pandemic disruptions and the Zimbabwe Exemption Permits discontinued, many have struggled to renew their stay in South Africa. This has left them deemed illegal immigrants with most of them unemployed and surviving hand to mouth by selling in the streets or begging.

### **‘Going home is no option’**

Following the threats, building occupants are divided. Some want to go home while others prefer to stay and make a living for themselves and their families back home.

Over the week-long period of researching this article, some of the occupiers had left the country.

Elizabeth Moyo\* from Zimbabwe said: “The life we lead is a gamble and sadly our children have also adapted to it. Any time of the night, while we are sleeping, police voices come screaming into our homes, and our doors are kicked open. I can’t remember how many times we have fixed doors or changed locks.”

Moyo said she endures the abuse because going home is not an option as she has a family to take care of. She survives by making food for people, especially the long-distance taxi drivers at the nearby taxi rank.

For others, like John Zimbadi, their only wish is to go back home even though they came to South Africa to try to make a living.

“After seeing that we are represented in the poorest of the poor in Zimbabwe we came here to South Africa to seek some greener pastures through street begging. Every day we have to walk abnormal distances just to make ends meet. Others go to sell fruits and vegetables to make ends meet, but that has also been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and operations against foreigners such as Dudula. Even putting food on the table is becoming harder by the day.

“As people with disabilities, we need help. We have overstayed here in South Africa lacking close monitoring of our children, leading them to early marriage and drug abuse. We are kindly asking for assistance in cash or kind so that we can go back to Zimbabwe and start some income-generating projects we have the potential to contribute to and build our economy,” said Zimbadi.

He is one of the few who have since left South Africa for Zimbabwe following the threats from Dudula. DM

*Daily Maverick is withholding the name of the building and that of the remaining occupants amid fears that they may be targeted not only by Dudula but by authorities who may deport them. For safety reasons amid threats and intimidation, Daily Maverick is not disclosing the identities of the reporting team.*

*\*Not their real names.*