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Regrets in South Africa After Lives and Livelihoods Lost in Mass Unrest

The manager of a looted supermarket in Soweto and a man who joined in ransacking it reflect on the causes and consequences of some of the worst unrest to hit parts of South Africa since the fall of apartheid.



Relatives mourning near the body of 13-year-old Vusi Dlamini, who was reportedly shot during a confrontation between looters and community members in Vosloorus on Wednesday.

By John Eligon
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SOWETO, South Africa — Gingerly stepping over the slick, muddied floor of a supermarket in Soweto that had just been emptied and gutted by looters, the manager fretted over where neighbors would now get their food and how he would support his wife and four children.

“Our livelihoods are gone,” said Tau Chikonye, the 44-year-old manager, who had worked at the market known as the Supa Store for 13 years.

Nearby, standing in front of his five-bedroom home, a laid-off hotel worker who had joined in the looting — carting away flour, chicken, Pepsi and dog food to his family — contemplated the damage that had been wrought: His community no longer had a store nearby for shopping.

“I feel horrible,” said the unemployed hospitality worker, Sifiso, who asked that his last name be withheld for fear of being arrested.

South Africa has been rocked to its core over the last week by looting and vandalism that has left at least 117 people dead and hundreds of millions of dollars in damage, officials said. It was among the worst violence and unrest the country had seen in the nearly 30 years since the end of apartheid.

The government has deployed 10,000 troops to quell the violence, and the defense minister requested 15,000 more. As tensions cooled a bit on Thursday, many were bracing for a difficult road ahead.

The turbulence was initially triggered by the imprisonment last week of South Africa's former president, Jacob Zuma, for defying a court order to testify in a corruption inquiry. Mr. Zuma, though scarred by extensive allegations of graft, nevertheless retains a loyal following.

But the unrest quickly became about broader grievances against the government and its failure to uphold the promises of a democratic South Africa. It was as though the lid blew off a pot that had been boiling for years.

"People lose their conscience," said Sifiso, the hotel worker, who is 32 and lost his job last year in the pandemic-induced shutdowns. "The government is failing us, meaning that they don't care about how we feel as the people of South Africa. If it means we are going to a mall to loot or to block a road for the government to actually hear people's cries, then so be it."



Police officers guard a man suspected of looting in Soweto on Tuesday.



A looted and vandalized store in Soweto on Tuesday.

Hours-long lines for food and gas have formed in the coastal city of Durban and in the Johannesburg area after the unrest destroyed supplies and disrupted delivery chains. Government officials were managing a volatile dynamic in which residents in some communities were taking up arms to defend their neighborhoods, with fears of vigilante justice inflaming racial tensions.

All of this is unfolding as South Africa is battling a devastating wave of coronavirus infections, which could become worse after looters without masks on packed stores.

Unemployment, which has climbed above 32 percent in part because of the pandemic, also will almost certainly increase as thousands suddenly become jobless because the businesses where they worked have been destroyed.

“We are all going to suffer,” said Leonard Ncube, standing outside of Boxer, a battered department store in Soweto where he was a manager, as community members swept up shattered glass and trash that littered the parking lot. He now had no job, and a household of seven people to support.

The violence has presented the biggest challenge of President Cyril Ramaphosa’s three-year tenure. Political opponents and citizens have criticized his response as slow, and called on him to be more assertive. He also has had to grapple with challenges to his leadership from within his own party, the African National Congress. He and his cabinet ministers have in recent days met with community members as well as political, faith and business leaders in an effort to restore confidence.

After Mr. Ramaphosa's predecessor, Mr. Zuma, was imprisoned last week, Zuma supporters, long at odds with the current president, called for communities to rise up in protest. The demonstrations started in Mr. Zuma's home province of KwaZulu-Natal last week, and quickly spiraled out of control and spread to Gauteng, a more prosperous province where Johannesburg is located.



South African military and police forces were deployed around the country, including in Vosloorus this week, to help quell the increasing violence.

In interviews with people in Soweto on Wednesday as the situation calmed, several said they had been sucked in to the looting because they saw others doing it. Some said they were after basic necessities that were often difficult to secure in this dire economy.

Others were simply after liquor, which they have not been able to purchase in recent weeks because of a ban on liquor sales as part of the nation's coronavirus restrictions.

Mr. Zuma's name was barely mentioned.

Sifiso's story was typical of many: He first heard about the looting on Monday through a phone call from a friend working at a mall, he said. He went and helped some of his friends load liquor from the mall, then heard from another friend that people were rummaging through the Supa Store in the Soweto community of Dlamini, near his home. He said his refrigerator was empty, and he was worried that the looting would deplete supplies.



Police officers and members of the community in Vosloorus attempt to reason with looters on Wednesday.

So he joined in to go pick up goods for his wife and two children. The store was so packed, he said, that he had to push his way in and wade, shoulder-to-shoulder, through a sea of people. The few police officers outside of the store could do nothing to stop the swarm of looters.

He realized his regrets later, as he was helping an older woman into a taxi. She told him that she had to go to a mall to get groceries because the supermarket had been destroyed. He had to break the news to her that the mall had been looted as well, and the realization of what he'd done hit him then.

“Our elderly people that are actually relying on these supermarkets or shopping centers that are close to the location — they’re looted,” he said. “So now it’s those people that are actually suffering.”

But the suffering predated the recent unrest. People were already being laid off. Those still working are seeing their salaries slashed. The cost of goods is rising. Basic services are failing.

Sifiso said his neighborhood was without power for nine months. Residents had to pay to get the public utility to install new equipment for electricity to be restored.



Men carrying a refrigerator in Vosloorus on Tuesday.

Many are angry at reports of corruption by public officials, which have eroded the government's moral authority and made the promises of Nelson Mandela's South Africa seem elusive.

Mr. Chikonye, the manager of Supa Store, said he could understand the anger and disillusionment of the looters who stole food from the market, but he could not understand why they had destroyed the building.

"Why are we burning the very resources we need that actually are going to uplift us?" he said. "If we want to protest, we protest in another way. But not to come and destroy resources."

The store did 150,000 transactions a month, but now it is darkened and ravaged as if a tornado tore through it. Beyond a large banner of a smiling family at the entrance is the detritus of the products the store once sold: flattened cornflakes packaging, juice boxes, soda cans. The shelves are completely empty. Bags of ice are all that are left in the freezer.



Debris scattered around the parking lot of a shopping mall near Johannesburg on Tuesday.

The owner of Supa Store, which was to celebrate its 20th birthday in September, has vowed to reopen. But there is no telling when that will be, Mr. Chikonye said, and the roughly 300 employees are left in limbo. He said he has already talked to his wife about ways to make money in the interim — perhaps getting eggs from a chicken farm and selling them on the street.

“It is the most overwhelming thing,” he said. “I really have to get down to the drawing board and see how to survive.”