

## Reflections of Gregg Gonalves, June 2008

Just compiled from my recent notes to friends and colleagues around the world from Cape Town on the violence against foreigners and its aftermath.

### Day One: Wednesday from Ground Zero-Cape Town

Hi, everyone-

The situation in Cape Town continues to be volatile, but the true violence and mayhem is in Gauteng, in the townships in the greater Johannesburg area, where most of the grisly deaths and assaults have happened. In Cape Town, the violence is more psychological, more social, with people in the townships getting notes posted on their front doors telling them to get out, people applauding as refugees leave neighborhoods with their belongings...Thus anywhere from 10,000-20,000 people have fled their homes in the Western Cape. It's absolutely shocking. (see news story below) I spent most of the day at our offices, which we share with AIDS Law Project and Treatment Action Campaign, working with medical doctors and medical students to do a site health needs assessment of the 33 locations at which refugees have taken shelter, in order to provide some sort of data to frame the city's and the province's responses, which have been dismal to date.

The city is setting up four refugee camps in the Western Cape to provide for the large number of displaced people, but these camps are far from the city, from the refugees' homes, their places of work, and are a risk in terms of the spread of infectious diseases. The situation is chaotic to say the least. At last report, a group of Somalis in one of the refugee camps had gone on hunger strike and refused to talk to any South African organization, calling on the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to come to their aid.

ALP and TAC are handling much of the political response to the crisis and Zackie Achmat and Fatima Hassan have met with the mayor, other city officials and provincial government. TAC volunteers have set up quite a relief effort with dozens, if not hundreds of people who have descended upon our offices to drop off supplies from baby diapers, to food, to clothing, to blankets and then are packing these supplies in trucks to deliver to key sites. Nathan Geffen, Andrew Warlick, Leslie Odendal, Gilad and Doron Isaacs, Dalli Weyers, Deena Bosch and others are organizing the whole thing--a gargantuan task for an organization like TAC, which has no history or expertise in relief efforts.

What is happening is horrific in so many ways, with people being hacked to death and burned alive in Johannesburg, Africans taking up arms against Africans, a government who seems strangely unable and uninterested in mobilizing society to deal with the situation properly. However, the outpouring of help by ordinary South Africans and what I've witnessed among TAC staff and volunteers, ALP, SONKE and ARASA staff at our office this weekend is extraordinary and beautiful.

The fate of the nation hangs on the edge of a knife--which way history will move depends on whether the best or the worst of South Africa's citizenry takes control over the next few years. A surrender to a corrupt ethno-nationalism is possible I guess--but I do believe that South Africans aren't ready to surrender the promise of 1994, of a truly rainbow, non-racialist social democracy quite yet. Please keep South Africa in your thoughts tonight. Tomorrow. This week. This year.

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### Day Two: Thursday from Ground Zero--Cape Town

Dear Friends--

A third dispatch from Cape Town

Just so sad.

What has happened in Cape Town and Johannesburg I fear has ripped asunder the fabric of South African society. What does it mean to be driven out of your home? Grandmothers attacked with hatchets? Men set on fire? While your neighbors cheer? Government may say what has happened doesn't represent the true face of South Africa, and yes, seeing the response of

ordinary people to the crisis, one remains hopeful, a bit. However, what has happened has unleashed revealed a barbarism just beneath the surface of this society; as a senior church official said at a rally the other day: South Africa has a tragic tolerance for violence...

We met with the mayor yesterday morning. She is with the Democratic Alliance, the center-right party that is the main opposition to the African National Congress. I was just disgusted by the meeting. The mayor is so damaged, so bitter that I am afraid she sees the entire humanitarian disaster unfolding as an opportunity for scoring political points. The premier of the province is not much better, and the president is a modern-day Nero--he was out of the country for days over the past two weeks, and has botched this crisis as he has botched the crisis in Zimbabwe, HIV/AIDS, crime and so many others...

Meanwhile it has started to rain in Cape Town--winters here are wet, and cold. There are 20,000 displaced people in Cape Town alone. Some are in real shelters but many have been put in tents in camps in recreation areas around the city, some on the beach. As the rain pelted down last night I could only think of the 3,500 in the camp at Soetwater and the thousands elsewhere and outside facing the elements in Cape Town.

At the offices people are at the end of their ropes, they are just burned out and are exhibiting all the symptoms of it, getting sick, getting angry, crying...We aren't a relief organization yet we have been supplying many of the basic necessities to many of the sites harboring refugees. We seem to be moving towards a transition towards taking up this crisis in a legal way, with class action lawsuits, in a political way, with a call for the UN to come in and take charge, and a move towards trying to organize in communities to try to rebuild them. This is something we can do, at least in part and I hope we stop being a relief organization over the next few days.

I've been dealing with the health and medical issues this week. Trying to organize site surveys to assess the health and medical needs at approximately 60 sites around the city. We're also organizing volunteers and have hundreds of doctors, nurses, health educators on our list of people willing to help. I met with the city and the provincial health departments on Monday and their plan of action, a their willingness to co-operate with each other, was good, but I fear they don't have the capacity to respond adequately to what is happening. I've attached a report from one of the big refugee camps, at the end of this message. Today I have to figure out how to get someone to pay attention to what is going on there and in so many other places throughout the city:

hi Greg

I have only got home - so am a bit tired - and so late.

Yesterday a department of "health" official promised a caravan and medical facilities to be set up and operational today.

Mr August was there early - went off to meeting after colonizing our tent and relegating us to the furthest marquis (the big party tent thing I cannot spell) - a tent we had to vacate after lunch because it was declared unsafe - moving our operation is no small task - The colonized tent was swept, a stretcher bed thing installed with screen and chairs and tables and nothing happened. Another broken promise to the people which is unacceptable - to set up the facade of a medical facility with nothing available.

At about 13h00 hours we were visited in the baby tent, a very nice nurse told us that they were leaving at three (at this stage we still believed that they would see babies). I asked if it was possible to organise staff to maybe volunteer an extra hour so that at least the 12 people our doctor had not been able to see could be attended to and an emphatic no was given - could not be arranged for volunteer nurses.

I walked past the tent at 14h20 and the medical tent was vacated - not a sign of the health department.

Essentially they could not get their act together and left.

The previous day we had managed to get in a private doctor that, diagnosed dispensed and comforted.

If all the nurses had even started to see people and take details of the sick - just something instead of standing around - just to check if there were no serious health problems - it would have been something - but nothing happened on the ground.

We had been sterilising bottles and our milton was all stolen the night before. I requested some, and they had stock and, was told that it was not a health issue!!!!!! now that really had my jaw on the ground - anyway I persuaded the head honcho that it was necessary that we continue to sterilise the bottles - runny tummies had been reported and women's mild had dried up - milton was promised - which should never have been an issue - they should have immediately on arrival checked what was happening with baby bottles and facilitated sterilization - but we had to fight for it and then the milton did not arrive before they left. Our private doctor arrived and he himself arranged jik and brought it to us - a civil doctor thought it was important enough to personally go fetch jik.

Health dep. relied on my statistics - I do a round each morning counting babies and checking for diarrhoea, coughs, sore throats, tb or arv's needed - at no stage did they offer to allocate a "body" to assist me with what is an immense task and takes me about 2/3 hours - the refugee women help me which is good - but they don't think of the mine of information on the ground that a census of this sort produces.

Yesterday - I was chastised because I call out in each tent sore throats? runny tummies? ARV's? TB meds etc?????? The people need to be aware that we are aware of the fact that ARV's are available - I told them that this was a crisis and what was the difference between tonsilitis and HIV and then all that was answered in a loud voice by a Xhosa official - "Well we must bring condoms then" - well the men went for her - very volatile situation arose but she had it coming - stupid to have sent the very ethnic group that had sent them to the concentration camp - we could have told the health dep. if only they had had appreciated that us working on the ground had been told by the people that they want no Xhosa - and COMMUNICATED with us.

I am too tired to make much sense - but need to go to bed - bottom line is that as of now, no medical assistance has been provided by government

- only one courageous private doctor and an amazing volunteer paramedic

- a few serious people taken away by ambulance and a few taken by private individuals to hospital for tb meds etc.....

Take care

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### **Day Three: Friday from Ground Zero—Cape Town**

Dear Friends--

The week is over, but the humanitarian crisis, the political crisis has only begun in South Africa. Yesterday was a bit quieter at the office as we shifted our work on the provision of basic supplies for the refugees to others, but as we do this it's as if the smoke is clearing--the landscape ahead is not pretty.

We did another site survey of health needs and basic conditions where refugees are sheltering yesterday with the help of our medical students, physicians and other volunteers. What we're seeing is a slow deterioration at the sites, with diarrheal outbreaks, scabies, and other minor infections that come with living in close quarters in unsanitary conditions. People are scared to leave the shelters to get medical care, and ambulances show up irregularly and late, babies are born in the shelters, TB cases are popping up here and there. In the saddest of situations, in a few sites co-ordinators are hoarding and stealing food and abusing refugees. The psychological health of refugees is fragile. Yesterday a woman at one of the sites who had fled Zimbabwe to seek refuge in South Africa, got a call that two of her children had died yesterday back home. She was inconsolable.

We met with Oxfam and MSF yesterday--it's clear the city and the province still can't get it together: the provision of basic necessities, of health care to the refugees is not happening in a co-ordinated way. The entire effort is being held hostage to the mayor and the premier's political rivalry--they snipe at each other in the daily newspapers instead of working closely together to maximize the efficiency of the relief effort.

We're still waiting for real help, from UNHCR, but the UN can't come in unless the national government calls for them to come in. The President won't. It would mean he'd have to agree what is happening is beyond his ability to handle. His pride and aloofness has already made him

unable to deal with HIV/AIDS, with crime in this country--the refugee crisis is unlikely to stir any up thing different in the man's head.

Meanwhile, the situation on the ground is worrying.

We heard last night the Home Affairs is taking names of refugees as a prelude we think to deportation. We had asked for a blanket moratorium on deportation and in fact asked them to give all displaced people official refugee status, but they have refused. The trust of refugees in South Africans is likely to crumble as the days go on. First they tell you you're being put into camps for your own "safety", then they're taking your names. What would you think was happening? Some refugees were shot at with rubber bullets yesterday by the police for refusing to move into the "official" camps, even though their own tent city was 50 meters or so from the camp itself.

A bus of refugees from Rwanda, Burundi and Congo was being transferred from outside a police station in town to a Jewish Day School in Seapoint on Wednesday night. They were terrified to get on the bus, about where they were going to be taken, what was going to happen to them. One of our staff members had to get on the bus with them, and even that wasn't enough--the refugees hung their heads out the window to make sure the bus was heading to Seapoint and not one of the refugee camps.

At a rally at the Cathedral on Wednesday a refugee from Congo spoke.

He said that talking about xenophobia was a convenient way to avoid a harsher word for what is happening: a war against foreigners. He spoke quietly, eloquently with great dignity. He doesn't want our help, he doesn't want to stay in South Africa. He said give us what you took from us, compensate us for our loss and then let us go. It was a harsh verdict.

Gregg

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#### **Day Four: Saturday from Ground Zero: Cape Town**

Dear Friends:

Today is the day of the impossible.

We're holding a civil society forum at our offices to discuss how to begin decentralizing the response to the refugee crisis to the sub-districts of the city instead of trying to manage everything centrally from various city-wide/national/regional NGOs. Should be hundreds of people in our small office, but can't move things now--oh well-they'll be hanging out the windows... The idea is that health/medical, sanitation, food and water, housing, security and protection, legal and human rights, education, transport--all of the issues we've been dealing with need to be now organized at the community level. It's a monumental organizing task: we're essentially asking people who come today to set up sub-district task teams to take on the immediate needs of refugees in their areas, start addressing long-term issues and monitor the progress of the response to the crisis. We'll also be asking various sectors in the areas I listed above to talk with each other if they haven't already to see how to address gaps in the response thus far. It will be a miracle if we can make this happen--things are tending towards greater disorder, entropy

here--the center truly does not hold. Other Don Quixote moments from the past 24 hours: a group of refugees from Congo has been communicating with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees--they want to be repatriated to a third country--they want out of South Africa and don't want to go home. Sadly, no country in the world is likely to welcome refugees from this current situation. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to be free--those words were written a long time ago, we build fences now to keep people out.

I wonder when this will end, knowing that this is just the beginning.

Another note from the doctor in one of the camps--I attached a message from her earlier in the week. Would like to meet her one day.

Hi

Just got home again and really did not have time to respond - there is just so much happening - it is quite overwhelming.

As for medical - I have not been paying as much attention as before as the tent is up BUT:

eg. man was assaulted and arm grazed - not serious but he needed it cleaned and there was no first aid kit - disaster management told me that they did not know where it was - medical tent closes at 3 and I had to take him into nappie section of baby tent and use hand cleansing alcohol solution to clean - was not serious but problem is that he had to wait for me as the camp residents do not know where to go after 3 if they need medical help and moreh seriously first aid kits not readily available, volunteers wafting around that are not trained and so no gloves available if they even know that they should be used with open wounds, AND we need clinic facilities for persons who work all day and only arrive late back in camp. I cannot understand why dep. of Health cannot make a plan for this.

The bottom line is that this is not a 1 week crisis but a long term reality - relocation is not going to happen, repatriation for most unviable and reintergration a pipedream at the moment and government are still treating this as a short term crisis - I am reminded all the time that this camp is not permanent - and so there appears to be no mobilizing to create structures that address this beyond next week.

We seriously need to be addressing what are the health consequences of people living in these very wet damp conditions, poor nutrition, extreme stress, very close contact (some tents have 22 men packed like sardines) with some going out to work - it will be like a creche - one goes down with something and it will spread at an abnormal rate exacerbated by jostling in queues for food, clothes etc. How can their health be maintained for what may be months if not years. prevention, prevention ad nauseum But I am sure that this is all going round and round in your head - I will call you the minute there is cause for concern - if I am aware - med tent appears to function. Keep well

### **Weekend from Ground Zero: Cape Town--31 May/1 June**

Saturday at noon about a hundred people descended upon our offices. The weekend before hundreds of people had also passed through, bringing donations, packing up trucks, volunteering. This Saturday we asked people from organizations all over the province to come together to talk about how to decentralize the response to the refugee crisis to the neighborhoods of the city, key towns outside of the Metro area, how to make local communities the centre of the relief effort and the advocacy that needs to get done to see us through this period into the new world at the other end. As Zackie Achmat from TAC said many of the people in the room had never been together before--we're forging a new coalition in the midst of this madness. For a few hours on Saturday, we asked people to divide up into groups based on the health sub-districts of the city and to come up with a plan of action. Encouragingly, all the groups plan to hold larger meetings this week to further organize people in their neighborhoods.

When everyone had left, my co-worker, Fatima Hassan and I, cleaned up our office. We broke down the ring of tables that had been the "command centre" for the civil society response for the week, we picked up the numerous cups and plates of food scattered around from a week of "eating in" in the office, piled up papers from various memos, reports, lists that had been generated during the past seven days. We arrange the office just as it was before this all started, except for two walls of newspaper clippings from the start of the violence in Cape Town to the present moment. We were planning to go back to work on Monday but the history of what had happened was all around us.

When I got home on Saturday evening, another email had arrived from Annie at Youngsfield Military Base--one of the refugee camps. Getting back to normal might be something I was looking forward to on Monday,

but Annie's reports from the camp showed that things weren't normal elsewhere in the city. Once again she reported problems at the site. I told her I'd come out in the morning to see for myself. All week I'd be in the office, I hadn't ventured out to the sites except to pass by the local police station in Caledon Square where a group of Congolese refugees had been camping out until Thursday or so. I asked Gilles from Medecins Sans Frontieres to go with me, since Annie was largely reporting problems with getting health care properly provided to the people at Youngsfield.

On Sunday morning, my partner Jeff and I drove down to Youngsfield to meet Annie. What we saw was hopeful. While Annie may have been anxious and frustrated, the camp, which was largely being run by a local Islamic charity organization, was running smoothly. A doctor was on site for the day and for the most part medical issues were under control, except that the health department locked up the first aid kit every afternoon and over the weekend while they were gone, which meant that the wonder drug, paracetamol (acetaminophen, Panadol) was held hostage in a big white van for the bulk of every 24 hours. When it's available paracetamol goes like candy--pill popping and the placebo effect seem to cure most minor ills in the camp. The numbers in Youngsfield had also seemed to drop, though we were dropping by during the day, there were reports of people going back to work, some going back to their communities to live with friends. While people were living in tents at an army base, the situation was good--many people in the squatter camps in Cape Town live in far less habitable conditions. As Gilles and I drove off, it felt like a corner had been turned.

Sunday evening, we had planned to see a friend for dinner, who was in from London and had a beach house down the peninsula. We decided that we'd visit Soetwater Refugee Camp on the way to see what was happening there. Soetwater is one of the biggest camps with at last report 3500 people in residence and located right on the beach in a national park 12km from the nearest train station, so fairly remote, though we could drive there in 45 minutes or so.

Jeff and I got to Soetwater late in the afternoon passing through the gate of the park and walking into the first of what I think were three settlements on the seashore. Gilad Isaacs from TAC was coming to meet us so we waited for him to come before going to look around. This felt different, though we had come into someone's home without asking, as if we were trespassers. We walked into the camp passed the medical tent, where patients were being seen, even late on a Sunday afternoon, passed a block of portable toilets (there seemed to be a reasonable number of them) and a block of showers, which in the summer would be for bathers coming in from swimming in the sea, to wash off the salty water and the sand. A band was setting up, which would be playing happy-clappy, come-to-Jesus music in a few minutes. People were living in large brightly striped tents as if we had come to a circus. It was all surreal.

I walked into the volunteer tent, where luckily I saw someone who had been to our offices earlier that week. She was volunteering with the South African Human Rights Commission that was at least partially staffing this campsite. I asked her questions about medical care at

Soetwater. Once again, the health issues didn't seem acute. There was a health post and any serious cases were being sent to False Bay Hospital. The main complaint is that scabies was spreading across the site.

I walked out and saw Gilad talking to a group of men outside a tent. They turned out to be refugees from Zimbabwe. They told us of problems with the Somalis who occupied another of the Soetwater sites down the beach. Many of these camps are set up in ethnic enclaves, with even further sub-divisions by clans among some groups like the Somalis. The Zimbabweans complained that the Somalis were defecating and urinating in the dunes creating an unsanitary environment and they worried once it started raining again the run-off would contaminate their tents.

What was most striking in our conversation with these men, and there were no women among them, is their isolation from what is going on in the city. There is no escape from Soetwater--while people are free to come and go, the site is in a national park and finding transport involves walking at least 12km to the train station or even further to find a minibus. Considering the violence last week on the trains and the taxi ranks, these men were going nowhere even if they were willing to walk to find a way out. Thus, they have no information on what is happening back where they were living, where they had shops, couldn't get to work--they are in a limbo on the beach. One small patch of a tent was plastered with last week's newspapers, but that was the extent of information available to them. Out in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do--the boredom of their plight while not life-threatening must be deadening.

As we continued to talk to these men, a larger crowd grew. One of the men was highly agitated. He asked us why we were here, what we thought we were doing coming to the camps, why we just were wandering around, why we didn't talk to their leaders instead of randomly talking to whomever we chose to. The situation grew quite tense and they told us to just leave. These men were angry, frustrated, cold and tired--we were slipping in for a few moments and retiring to our comfortable homes and they saw it as disrespectful. It didn't matter what we had been doing all week to address their plight, we were tourists gawking at them. We would drive off in a few minutes, the sun would go down and they would spend another winter night huddled together without a future, a country in tatters under a dictator back home who will steal yet another election this month, giving them no where to go.

Jeff and I barked at each other on the drive out of Soetwater. I was upset by the experience and so was he and took it out on each other. We drove to have dinner with our friend from the UK and slipped back into our world, at his house in a posh Southern suburb watching a sunset sipping wine. How should I feel? I didn't know. It was surreal and grotesque--this contrast--but it is also the contradiction of life in South Africa, in Cape Town, where people in shacks live ten minutes from people in sprawling estates, manicured lawns, and more of everything than they'd ever need in a lifetime.

What is this country? Is it the future of Africa? Is it the past of

the continent? Is it the way of the world to come? Are we to live on a planet where the affluent or even the middle-class live walled in away from everyone else who are struggling for their daily bread, for a bed for the night?

We already do.

Gregg

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