The Nelson Mandela Foundation is deeply concerned about the attacks in many parts of our country on people perceived to be foreigners. This is the latest manifestation of a phenomenon which has been troubling our democracy for a long time. We welcome the intervention by our President and other senior leaders and call on all levels of leadership to address the challenge as a priority.

What is being called xenophobia emerged very early in South Africa’s journey with democracy. In 1995 Nelson Mandela addressed a gathering in Alexandra and said:

*“During the years I lived here, the people of Alexandra ignored tribal and ethnic distinctions. Instead of being Xhosas, or Sothos, or Zulus, or Shangaans, we were Alexandrans. We were one people, and we undermined the distinctions that the apartheid government tried so hard to impose. It saddens and angers me to see the rising hatred of foreigners.”*

The last major outbreak of violence was in 2008. Soon after this the Nelson Mandela Foundation embarked on a two-year dialogue process that engaged communities in eleven of the violence ‘hotspots’ across five provinces. The results of that intervention were communicated to structures of the state and civil society. It saddens and angers us that sustainable solutions have still not emerged. We believe that what we are seeing being demonstrated is a terrible failure of memory by South Africans. We are forgetting the long years of struggle against ethnic and related forms of identity mobilisation. We are forgetting the support given by the peoples of the African continent to the struggle against apartheid.

It is time for all South Africans to take responsibility for embracing the hospitality that defines our democratic order and to work together to find solutions to a problem which is destroying lives and bringing us shame. The time for pointing fingers is past. We must understand that we are all complicit in the development of cultures of ‘othering’. The focus now must be on making liberatory futures for all who live in South Africa. Government interventions can only be part of a medley of interventions to address the deep-rooted structural and attitudinal dimensions that underlie the challenge. Every sector of our society will have to be engaged – the state, government, the private sector, civil society, communities and individuals. We need an integrated strategy which addresses *inter alia* the reconciliation of diverse communities post-conflict, the protection and reintegration of the dislocated, the development of coherent migration policies, the teaching of international solidarity as an integral part of our liberation history, the reinforcement of the concept of South Africa as part of the African continent and her struggles, and the unravelling of the terrible societal knot created by inequality, poverty and systemic corruption.

This is a defining moment for South Africa. We need strong leadership, sustained action and the harnessing of South Africans’ highest ideals and dreams to meet the challenge successfully.