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DIASPORA AFRICA

Biggest Migration Trends of 2026



Editor's Note

The year 2026 is almost at a close. Several migration issues have trended, with some taking the world by surprise. Many historic events occurred during this outgoing year, setting the stage for new migration policies and changes to existing ones worldwide. As Issue 18, the year's final issue, this edition looks back on and reflects on some of the biggest migration trends of 2026.



One of the biggest migration trends of 2026 was the third-country removal deals between the Global North and some third countries. The most renowned of these deals involved the US and more than 30 third countries. What made these deals particularly noteworthy was when the US began sending deportees to conflict-prone countries such as the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Another migration trend this year was the implementation of Presidential Proclamation 10998 by the Trump-led administration on 1 January 2026, restricting 39 countries through full and partial visa restrictions. 25 of these countries are African, with 11 facing full visa restrictions and 14 facing partial restrictions.

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum had been discussed for years, but it only went live in June 2026. The Pact introduced rules on how Europe screens arrivals, processes asylum claims, shares responsibility among member states, and speeds up the return of those refused protection through the establishment of Return Hubs.

In late July 2026, the Ceuta crossing also occurred. The Spanish enclave of Ceuta witnessed over 72,000 African migrants breaching the fortified border separating Morocco from European territory. The aim was to enter Spain in search of greener pastures.

South Africa's xenophobic violence triggered the return of well over 200,000 African nationals from the country to their respective countries across the continent. 2026 marked another resurgence of xenophobic violence, often beginning with protests. Several individuals lost their lives, while others left the country either through government-assisted routes or at their own expense.

Migration Monitor

The year 2026 was marked by a series of policy shifts and events that reshaped the experiences of African migrants and diaspora communities. From externalised border controls in the Global North to internal displacements within the continent, five developments stood out as defining trends. Below is a brief chronicle of how each unfolded.

Third-country deportation deals

The United States expanded arrangements with 35 third countries, allowing the removal of people to countries other than their countries of origin. Of these, 31 countries actually received about 25,000 people. Among the countries involved in the deals, 13 are African countries, including Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, and South Sudan. Human Rights Watch and other organisations documented cases in which deportees faced arbitrary detention, limited access to legal processes and, in some instances, onward movement to countries where they risked harm. Several African governments accepted these transfers under bilateral agreements, some involving cash inducements, with limited transparency and safeguards.

US large-scale visa bans and freezes

On 1 January 2026, Presidential Proclamation 10998, introduced by the Trump-led administration, took effect, imposing full or partial visa restrictions on nationals of 39 countries. A substantial share, 25, of the affected states were African. Full suspensions applied to several nations, while partial restrictions limited immigrant visas and certain non-immigrant visa categories for others, including Nigeria, the largest Black nation in the world, Senegal, and many West, Central, and Southern African countries. The measures disrupted scholarship and mobility opportunities, particularly for African students and scholars, family reunification, and professional travel, creating prolonged uncertainty for diaspora communities already in the United States and those seeking to join them.

SPOTLIGHT

The UK government also unveiled its Earned Settlement reforms in November 2026, proposing to replace the usual five-year route to permanent residence with a ten-year standard pathway. Applicants would qualify sooner based on their earnings or public service, while stricter conditions would apply to conduct, English proficiency, and National Insurance contributions before settlement.

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

After years of negotiation, the Pact entered into application across all EU Member States on 12 June 2026. It introduced

mandatory screening at external borders, accelerated asylum procedures for applicants from countries with low recognition rates, and a framework for faster returns. The rules also formalised solidarity mechanisms among Member States and strengthened the legal basis for cooperation with third countries on interception and readmission. For many African asylum seekers, the practical effect was shorter timelines for decisions and reduced opportunities for substantive examination of claims once inside Europe.

The Ceuta crossing

In late July 2026, an estimated 72,000 to 80,000 people crossed from Morocco into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta over a period of roughly 48 hours — the largest single mass crossings recorded at the EU's external land border with Africa. The majority were Moroccan nationals, though people from Sudan, West Africa and other regions were also minimally present. At least several dozen lives, estimated at about 100, were lost primarily through drowning or in the crush at the border. Spanish and Moroccan authorities moved quickly to reverse the flow; the overwhelming majority returned within days, leaving a few thousand people, including unaccompanied minors and girls, still in the territory.

South Africa's xenophobic violence and large-scale returns

Throughout 2026, anti-migrant protests and violence intensified in several South African provinces, particularly Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. The unrest, coupled with heightened immigration enforcement, prompted a large-scale movement of African nationals out of the country. By mid-year, more than 178,000 people had either been formally deported or had left under pressure. Zimbabwe received the largest number of returnees (over 115,000), followed by Malawi (more than 56,000). Smaller but significant numbers of Nigerians, Ghanaians, Mozambicans and others were also repatriated through government-assisted or self-funded channels. The events strained bilateral and diplomatic relations and highlighted the vulnerability of intra-African migrant communities.



From our Writers

Africa's Creative Economy is Crossing Borders, But its Workers Still Can't Move Freely

Hussain Wahab

When South African Grammy-winning artist Tyla announced the African leg of her A POP World Tour, Lagos was among the cities where fans expected to see one of the continent's fastest-rising stars.

The excitement did not last. On Nigerian social media, some users called for a boycott of the concert, arguing that South African artists should not expect a warm reception. At the same time, Nigerians and other Africans continue to face xenophobic violence in South Africa. Among those calling for the show to be brought down was Nigerian social-media activist Martin Otse, popularly known as VeryDarkMan. Days later, Lagos disappeared from Tyla's tour itinerary.

There has been no public explanation from Tyla or her team for the change. This reporter contacted her management for comment but received no response at the time of publication. But the episode exposed a much bigger contradiction. For Iyabo Ademide, 21, who works at a pharmacy in Abuja, the cancellation was personal.

Like thousands of Nigerians, she had been looking forward to December in Lagos, when concerts, parties and nightlife turned the city into one of Africa's major entertainment destinations. Tyla's scheduled performance was part of the attraction.

Her disappointment, however, was quickly overshadowed by a larger question: why can an African culture and song cross borders almost instantly while an African musician, worker or fan may face hostility



visa, documentation problems or restrictions when attempting the same journey?

When Xenophobia Crosses Borders

Wits University's Xenowatch report recorded 406 verified incidents of xenophobic discrimination between 2022 and 2025, resulting in 75 deaths; it recorded a further 22 verified incidents in the first five months of 2026, with vigilante groups imposing deadlines and demanding action against undocumented migrants. Anti-immigrant mobilisation included marches, intimidation, forced evictions, attacks and the displacement of migrants in parts of the country.

On June 28, two Nigerian nationals were killed during the violence, according to Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One was allegedly killed by police officers and the other by unidentified attackers. Nigeria condemned the killings and urged its citizens not to retaliate. According to the Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, Nigeria subsequently evacuated 1,490 Nigerians from South Africa by July 15, 2026. The government described the operation as a voluntary evacuation responding to xenophobic attacks and related security concerns.

Beyond Nigeria, since late May, more than 178,000 African migrants have left South Africa amid a crackdown on undocumented migration and growing anti-immigrant tension.

The backlash has also moved beyond social media and public anger, beginning to affect South Africa's cultural exports. South Africa's Justice Minister, Mmamoloko Kubayi, has publicly acknowledged that South African artists are losing bookings and having performances cancelled across Africa even when the artists themselves have no connection to xenophobic attacks.

Makhadzi's scheduled performance at Zimbabwe's Cheso Music Festival was cancelled, Musa Keys was removed from a festival lineup in Harare, and Mafikizolo lost a concert in Victoria Falls. South African gospel artist Sabata Masoka has also said that a Nigerian church conference postponed his appearance because organisers did not want to take artists from "xenophobic South Africa", costing him R50,000.

A January 2026 Afrobarometer survey found that 56% of South Africans believed the government should limit cross-border movement, while only 40% supported free movement across Southern African borders for trade or work. The same survey found that 69% viewed immigrants' economic impact negatively, while 83% supported reducing or eliminating the entry of foreign job seekers.

Speaking with Wale Ojetimi, the longest-serving foreign correspondent of the News Agency of Nigeria, who has lived in South Africa for 26 years, the tension reflects a long-standing problem of belonging for some African migrants.

He describes xenophobic attacks as a violent manifestation of tensions between

locals and non-natives. But the survey evidence suggests a more complicated reality than a country uniformly opposed to Pan-Africanism: South Africans hold sharply divided attitudes toward immigration, even as many continue to live alongside and interact with foreigners.

When Culture Moves Faster Than People

For nearly two decades, African music has crossed borders faster than politics. Afrobeats has spread from Lagos to Nairobi, Johannesburg, Accra and London. Amapiano has moved from South Africa into Nigerian clubs and global playlists. Artists collaborate across national, linguistic and cultural boundaries, often creating music that is difficult to categorise by nationality.

Tyla has participated in that cultural cross-pollination herself. Her collaboration with Nigerian superstar Wizkid and their joint performance at London's All Points East festival in August 2025 offered another example of African artists building audiences beyond national borders. But the people behind the culture still encounter borders.

Ayra Starr's experience offers a different illustration of how administrative requirements can disrupt African cultural exchange. In 2024, her planned South African performances were cancelled after she was unable to meet the country's yellow fever vaccination requirements. The episode was later misrepresented online as evidence that she had been denied entry because of xenophobia. While it does not establish hostility toward Nigerians, it shows how administrative barriers can disrupt cultural exchange even when artists and audiences are eager to connect.

According to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry's 2026 Global Music Report, recorded-music revenues in sub-Saharan Africa grew by 15.2% in 2025 to $120 million. South Africa remained the region's largest market, accounting for 78.1% of regional revenues after growing by 12.9%.

The success of these industries depends on people moving. Producers, musicians, film crews, dancers, designers, managers and technicians travel between countries, while festivals bring artists and audiences together. Streaming can cross borders without passports. The people producing the culture cannot.

From Tyla to a Continental Grievance

For Professor Jimoh Olaiya Amzat, a sociologist, the reaction to Tyla cannot be understood simply as anger toward one musician. "This is less about Tyla herself than about how social media collapses distance and turns individual grievances into national scripts," he tells this reporter.

Repeated reports of xenophobic violence, he argues, act as *trigger events*, reviving collective memories and transforming individual frustration into broader national resentment. Tyla therefore becomes a symbolic proxy for grievances directed at governments and institutions.

"What we are seeing is eroding generalised trust," Amzat says. "Distrust migrates from state-level grievance into interpersonal and cultural spaces because those are the only arenas where ordinary citizens feel they can retaliate or be heard." The result is a contradiction at the heart of Pan-Africanism.

"Pan-Africanism has always been more of an elite, aspirational identity than a lived everyday one," Amzat says. "Music creates moments of symbolic unity, but those moments remain fragile when they are not supported by freedom of movement, economic interdependence, and accountability."

Cristiano D'Orsi, a researcher specialising in African refugee and migration law and visiting Professor (with a focus on Africa) at the University of Venda, sees xenophobia as a direct threat to those connections. "The rejection of fellow Africans creates a social fracture and blocks people-to-people connections," he tells *DA*.

The damage, he argues, extends beyond individual migrants. Xenophobia can strain diplomatic relations, discourage cross-border labour mobility and weaken continental integration initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area.

The Cost of Keeping People Apart

The economic case for migration is also more complicated than the political rhetoric suggests. An OECD–ILO study of South Africa's economy found that immigrants contributed approximately 9% of GDP and that immigrant workers could increase income per capita by up to 5%, based on the economic data available to the study.

The study also found a positive net fiscal contribution from immigrants and no significant effect of immigrant workers on employment among South Africa's native-born population at the national level. That matters for an African creative economy increasingly built around cross-border movement.

A disrupted concert does not affect only an artist. It can affect venue operators, promoters, sound engineers, security workers, hotels, transport providers, vendors and other informal workers whose livelihoods depend on cultural events.

For Nigeria and South Africa, the contradiction carries an additional historical weight. The countries established formal diplomatic relations in 1994, following Nigeria's support for South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle. South Africa says Nigeria supported the African National Congress and other liberation movements and spearheaded campaigns for political and economic sanctions against apartheid.

Today, the two countries are among Africa's most influential cultural and economic powers. South Africa has become the home of Amapiano; Nigeria has driven the global expansion of Afrobeats. Their artists collaborate, their audiences overlap and their companies operate across borders. ,Yet the relationship between their peoples remains vulnerable to political tensions.

When contacted, Akindele Olunloyo, National Publicity Secretary of the Nigerian Union South Africa, said many Nigerians have successfully integrated into South African society. But members continue to report business-related harassment, documentation difficulties and occasional hostility.
Preserving Pan-African unity, he argues, requires stronger protection for migrants, continued cultural collaboration and economic policies that address the conditions that fuel xenophobia.

Between Solidarity and Stereotyping

Some Nigerian fans supported calls to boycott Tyla as an act of solidarity with victims of xenophobic attacks. Others argued that musicians should not be held responsible for the actions of governments or individuals.

Rasaq Bolarinwa, 31, said Tyla's silence on xenophobia made the boycott understandable. John Matthew disagreed, arguing that music, like football, can bring people together across political and national divisions.

Human rights activist and African Action Congress (AAC) presidential candidate Omoyele Sowore also opposed the boycott, arguing that political leaders, not musicians, should be held accountable for xenophobic violence. "No one should hold a talented musician like Tyla vicariously liable for the crimes of xenophobia," he wrote on X.

Misinformation Fuels

Journalists, meanwhile, have a role in preventing those tensions from becoming broader stereotypes. Veteran journalist and media trainer Lekan Otunfodunrin warns against presenting xenophobic violence as though it represents the whole of South Africa.

"We should report the matter for whatever it is worth as clearly as possible," he says, warning journalists against relying on social-media narratives that may amount to misinformation or disinformation. Media strategist Yinka Olaito similarly argues that journalism should examine the structural causes of xenophobia rather than simply reproduce anger.

"If there are undocumented migrants, they did not fall from heaven," he says, pointing instead to corruption, weak enforcement and governance failures that allow irregular migration to persist. The legal framework, meanwhile, already offers protections.

Legal practitioner Waliu Olaitan Wahab says South Africa's Constitution, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and international treaties including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination provide substantial protections against discrimination and violence.

"The legal framework is largely adequate on paper. Implementation remains the greatest challenge," he tells **DA.**

An Unfinished Anthem

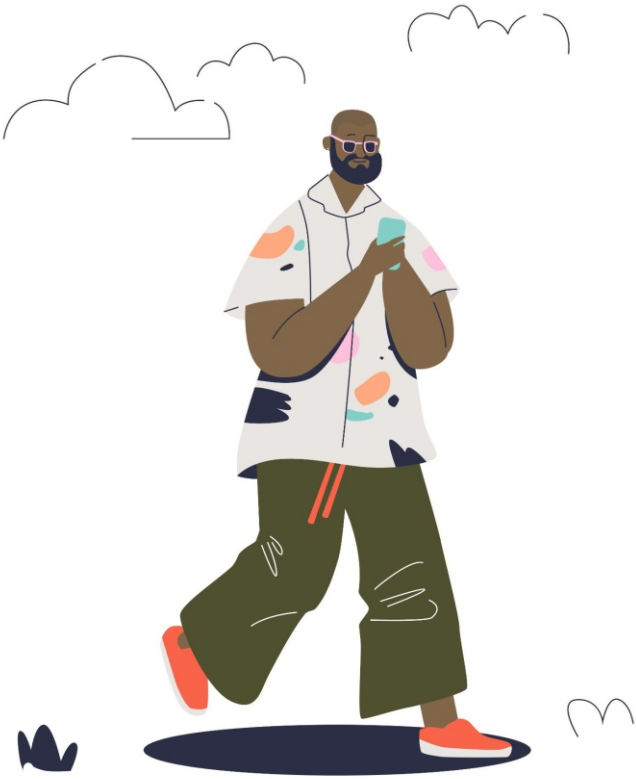
Professor Amzat believes rebuilding trust therefore requires more than celebrating Pan-Africanism through music. It requires accountability when xenophobic violence occurs, stronger regional cooperation, enforcement of migrant protections, cross-border journalism that humanises rather than stereotypes, and sustained cultural exchanges that create relationships rather than one-off spectacles.

The challenge is not persuading Africans to enjoy one another's music. They already do. The challenge is ensuring that the freedom enjoyed by African music is eventually matched by greater freedom for the people who create it.

Long before politicians spoke of continental integration, African musicians were already practising it. They crossed borders in search of audiences, collaborated across languages and built careers on the belief that talent could matter more than nationalit.That belief has produced some of Africa's greatest cultural successes.

Whether it can survive xenophobia, restrictive mobility and declining trust may determine not only the future of African music, but how far the continent's vision of Pan-Africanism can become an everyday reality. Amzat argues that if an African song can travel farther than an African citizen, then the continent's most inspiring anthem of unity remains unfinished.



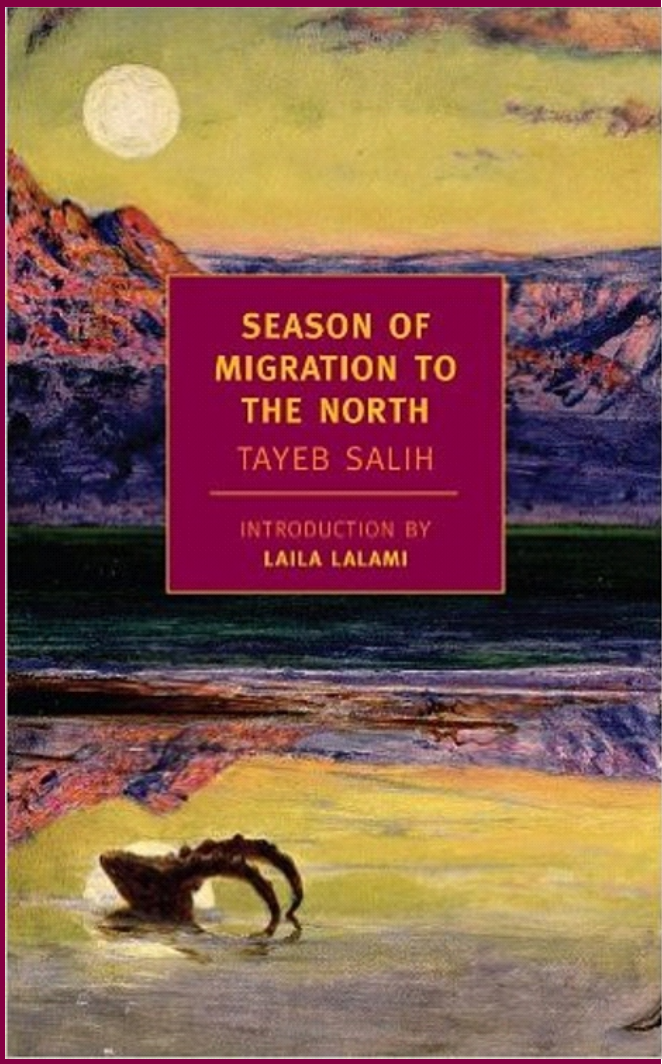


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What to Read Now



Set in postcolonial Sudan, this novel follows an unnamed narrator who returns to his village after years of studying in Europe, only to encounter Mustafa Sa'eed, a mysterious stranger whose past in England gradually unravels. Through Mustafa's story, Salih interrogates the complicated relationship between Africa and Europe, particularly how colonial power, cultural alienation and racial hierarchies shape individual identities and relationships.

The novel's strength lies in its refusal to present colonialism as merely a historical or political arrangement. Instead, Salih explores its intimate consequences: the internalisation of racial hierarchies, the performance of identity, the desire for belonging and the violence that can emerge from unresolved cultural encounters. Mustafa becomes a particularly unsettling embodiment of these contradictions, while the narrator's own uncertainty reflects a broader postcolonial struggle to reconcile competing worlds.

Salih offers no comfortable moral conclusions, forcing readers to confront the enduring complexities of power, belonging and selfhood. Decades after its publication, Season of Migration to the North remains a remarkably relevant meditation on the psychological and cultural afterlives of colonialism.

Resources

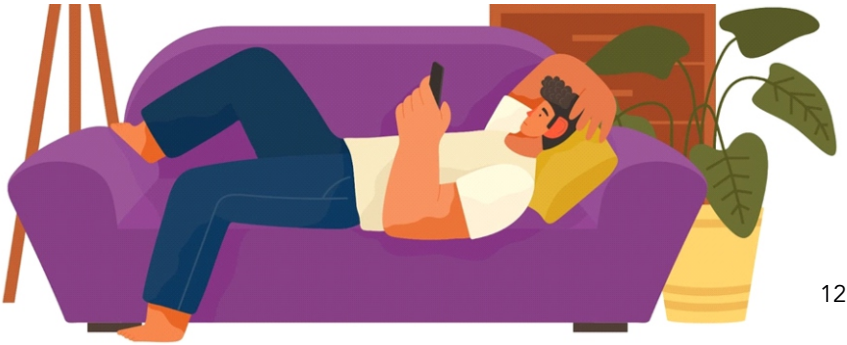
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
Founded in 1933, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) is a global humanitarian organisation that supports refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, and other people displaced by conflict and crises and operate in more than 40 countries.
https://www.rescue.org/uk/country/nigeria

2. National Immigration Law Center (NILC):A US non-profit founded in 1979 in Los Angeles that helps in the defending and advancing the right of low income earners migrants through advocacy and policy for equal access to opportunities and justice.
https://www.nilc.org

3. European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE): founded in 1974, is a Brussels-based alliance of 129 NGOs across 40 European countries, that work aim to protect refugees and asylum seekers by monitoring EU asylum policy, and advocating for fair and humane law in line with international human right standard
https://ecre.org/

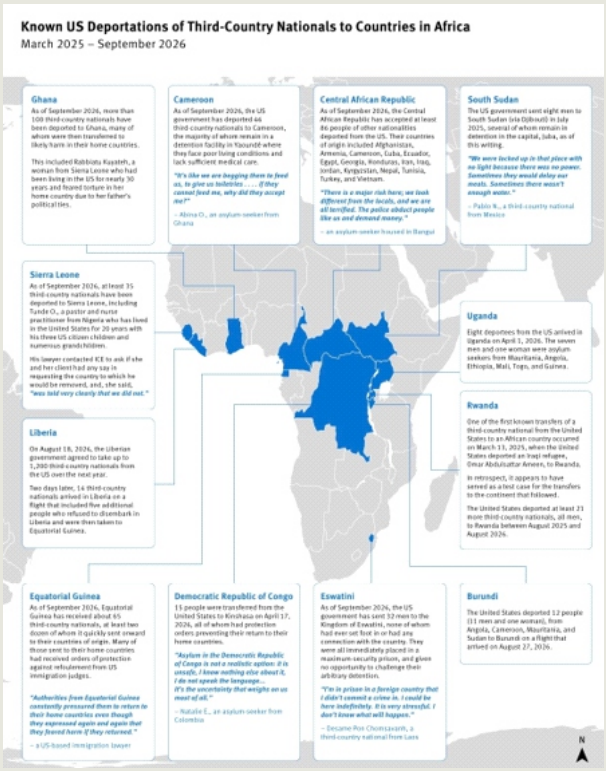
4. Ca-minando Fronteras was established in 2002 by individuals from different parts of the Western Euro-African border with a collective mission to defend the rights of migrants and their communities, with a focus on protecting migration routes, documenting human rights violations, and supporting victims and families. The organisation documents deaths and disappearances along migration routes with a broader mission to raise awareness of abuses at the Western Euro-African border.
https://caminandofronteras.org/en/

5. HIAS South Africa works to improve the lives of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants by addressing the challenges they face and supporting their access to fundamental rights and protections. The organization is committed to combating and preventing Afrophobia and xenophobia across South Africa. Its work spans legal protection, advocacy, mental health and psychosocial support, and initiatives to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls.
Culled from HIAS Website, South Africa section
https://hias.org/where/south-africa/



In Numbers

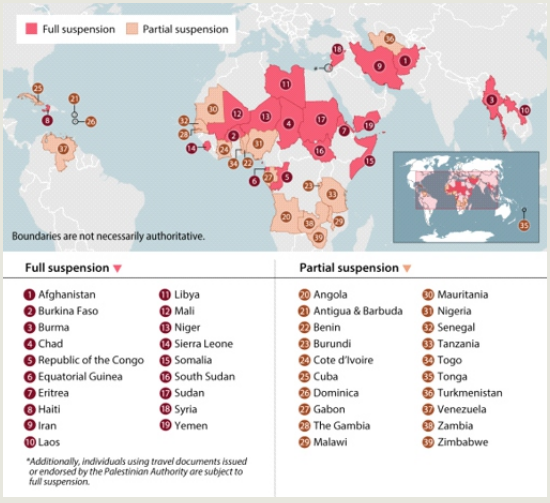
Third-country deportation deals.



The United States, between the period 2025 to 2026, expanded deportation of third-country nationals to several African countries, including Ghana, Cameroon, South Sudan and Uganda, many of whom had no prior ties to the countries being deported to.

Source : Human Rights Watch 2026

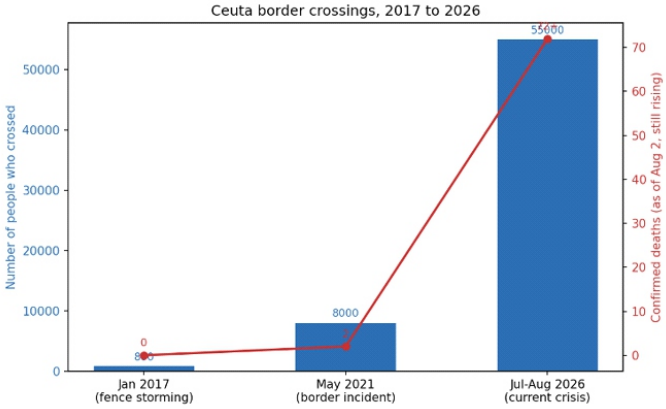
The US large-scale visa bans and freezes.



The United States imposed varying levels of travel restrictions on several countries, ranging from full suspension affecting countries such as Chad, Libya, Niger, and Sierra Leone to partial suspension targeting countries such as Nigeria, Tanzania, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire. These measures reflect an increasingly restrictive immigration and travel policy in the us.

Source: CRS analysis of White House, "Restricting and Limiting the Entry of Foreign Nationals to Protect the Security of the United States," presidential proclamation, December 16, 2025

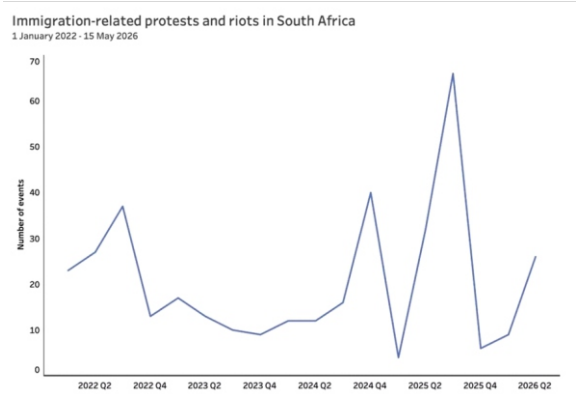
Ceuta crossing



The number of Ceuta border crossings jumped from around 800 in 2017 to over 50000 in 2026, and confirmed death cases continually rise above 70 as of August 2026.

Source: Indian foundation Chintan platform

South Africa's xenophobic violence and large-scale returns



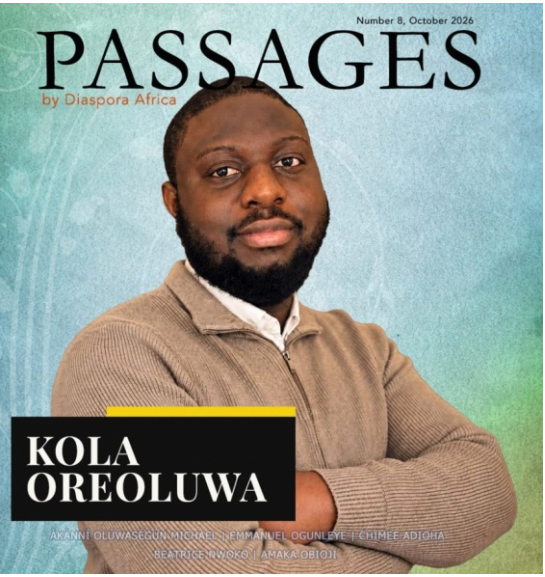
https://acleddata.com/expert-comment/why-are-anti-immigrant-attacks-increasing-south-africa

South Africa has experienced significant highs and lows of violence and tension surrounding migration and the presence of foreign nationals over the last few quarters from January 2022 to May 2026. Although there was a general decline through much of 2023 and early 2024, a spike occurred in early 2024 and a decline in the final quarter of 2025. Incidents have, however, begun rising again in 2026.

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)

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Kola Oreoluwa: African Languages Keep Diaspora Generation Connected To Home

For millions of Africans living outside the continent, staying connected to home can mean more than returning for holidays or maintaining familiar cultural traditions. Sometimes, it's as fundamental as speaking the language of the people who raised them. Language can keep a family close even when distance separates them. It can carry stories from grandparents to grandchildren, preserve a household's humour, and make cultural traditions easier to pass from one generation to another. However, when a younger generation no longer speaks the language of its parents or grandparents, that connection begins to fray.

Kola Oreoluwa encountered that distance at a family function after moving to the UK. His grandmother called to speak with his cousins and spoke to them in Yoruba. They could respond with only a few words, making it hard to sustain a proper conversation. The experience made Oreoluwa think differently about what is lost when an African language disappears from everyday family life. It is not only vocabulary that becomes unfamiliar. Stories, jokes, proverbs, family histories, and the subtle ways generations understand one another can also become harder to pass down.

A full essay is available to read on Diaspora Africa's website.

We are building a newsroom & community that counters misinformation and bias in global mainstream news about African migration. We are working with local and cross-border journalists to challenge biased global reporting frameworks that shape migration. We want to disrupt extractive storytelling practices & expand the range of perspectives represented in international media discourse surrounding migration.

The magazine is independently funded by the Diaspora Africa team. Many updates featured in this publication are sourced from our Migration Monitor database, which tracks migration trends affecting African migrants and diasporic communities globally.

monitor.diasporaafrica.org

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