

Mbeki's xenophobic response too late - *Financial Times*

President Thabo Mbeki put out a strong statement on the xenophobic attacks in and around Johannesburg this week - but it should have been done last week, immediately when the crisis erupted, said the *Financial Times* correspondent in South Africa, Alec Russell, speaking on Wednesday, 21 May 2008. at the International Media Forum conference in Bryanston, Johannesburg.

His criticism was part of a day in which the overwhelming theme was critical of the government's handling of its public and media relations.

It is easy to write such a statement; it could be done in two, three minutes. The news cycle is so fast that immediate responses are vital, Russel said. Most journalists truly try to be fair, but they need contact and information.

He asked President Mbeki during an interview why the touted Presidential Press Corps did not get off the ground and the president had said that he was very disappointed with a leak during its development. But, said Russell, that is not a reason not to go ahead with its establishment. Just lumping all journalists together is not the way.

Blood from stone

Although there were some good government spokesmen, most simply did not cooperate. Getting information from government was like getting blood from a stone.

Perhaps there is a lesson to be learnt from Jacob Zuma. He finds himself in an awkward situation and yet gives media interviews freely and his image has certainly changed.

Russell said when he first came to South Africa in 1993, it was easy to speak to the ANC leaders. One could just walk into Nelson Mandela's office and having such leaders to dinner was possible.

But when he returned in 2006, the situation had soured and access is now very difficult. But, this probably happens to all parties that have been in power for a while.

Will the new openness toward the media from Zuma last beyond the next election, Russell asked.

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