This Is Where We Wait

A Zimbabwean is reluctant to describe the xenophobic violence that brought him to a
U.N. displacement camp near Johannesburg.

Maxwell Nkosi sits calmly in the afternoon sun dressed in a black-and-red
Ferrari-branded shirt. But Maxwell doesn’t own a Ferrari. Maxwell doesn’t own
anything. Not any more.

A month has passed since he lost his possessions and home to angry South
Africans and fled to the U.N. displacement camp in Rembrandt Park, northeast of
Johannesburg. The camp is an open field with brown grass and orderly rows of
marshmallow-looking tents. Surrounded by upper-middle-class subdivisions, the camp is
enclosed with metal fencing and an outer layer of barbed wire. It is unclear whether the
barrier is for the sake of the individuals within the camp—or those outside.

Security guards at the entrance want to know who you are and why you’ve come.
Visitors are permitted, but it’s a little more complicated for the media. The guards are
weary of cameras and the stories that might come out of the camp.

It’s all men here. Spirited music from a portable stereo blasts as they play soccer.
During a time-out a goalie shows off a few dance moves, and men laugh with him. Some
watch the game; others play cards, talk or do laundry. It feels like an unorganized
summer camp. There’s no requirement to do anything, but only the optimistic are
enjoying themselves. The reality is, however, that this isn’t summer camp, and the reason
these men are here is serious.
Away from the drumming stereo and chanting crowd, Maxwell sits beside his tent, number 45. He’s polite but doesn’t want to talk, especially about what happened.

Like most Zimbabweans, he’s hesitant to talk to journalists. The dictatorial government in Zimbabwe has made its citizens fearful. The wrong words could result in beating, rape or death.

But Maxwell’s hesitation is different. A South African resident for 14 years, he doesn’t fear persecution from the Zimbabwean government. He stuffs his hands in his pockets and looks around him at the men who share his confinement and are watching him now. He mutters something about them and about journalists, then says he’s sorry but can’t say anything.

The press has been to this camp and many others in South Africa, reporting on similar stories about foreigners who left their homes after the xenophobic violence in May 2008. Thousands of people from all over the southern Africa are now corralled in white tent communities supported by the UN and charities like the Red Cross. Stories of their situation appeared around the world. But, Maxwell points out, still they sit and wait. What good will it do, talking to a journalist?

He walks away, back to the waiting post outside his tent. But moments later he returns. He’s willing to talk. With very little probing or interruption, Maxwell sits on a bucket beside his tent and, squinting against the afternoon sun, recounts the horrific day of May 12, 2008.

Jillian Sloan