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# Diplomatic buildings to cost R1.5bn over 5 years

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THE Department of International Relations and Co-operation has budgeted more than R1.5 billion for the repair and building of properties for foreign diplomatic missions over the next five years.

This figure comes from the department's newly published five-year strategic plan. It includes building new chanceries, where diplomatic missions conduct their official business, buying or leasing land, as well as maintenance and renovations to official residences abroad. Some of the most costly repairs or acquisitions include:

- R153 million to refurbish the chancery in Washington, US. The building in Embassy Row has been undergoing major construction to accommodate larger staff numbers, which according to the website of the contractor includes "major demolition of the interior", upgraded safety systems, the cleaning and restoration of the limestone exterior, new windows and new slate roofing and the "meshing of historical finishes with a new, modern look".

A replica of the statue of Nelson Mandela by artist Jean Doyle that stands outside the old Victor Verster Prison, with his fist raised, has also been acquired to stand outside the embassy, but South African ambassador to the US Ebrahim Rasool embarked on a fund-raising drive to cover the cost. It will join statues of other political stalwarts such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King in the area.

- R125m for a new chancery in Beijing, China.
- R82m to upgrade the chancery in Juba, the capital of South Sudan.
- R120m to build a new chancery in Luanda, Angola, to be inaugurated next month.
- R132m to improve South Africa's diplomatic mission in The Hague, which includes renovations to the consulate and the official residence.
- R100m to get "functional office space" in London.
- R75m to refurbish the chancery and the official residence in Paris.
- R70m for staff houses in Mbabane, Swaziland.

The department also has an R800 000 project to draw up plans for "standard design for chanceries and officials' residences".

Despite the large budget, little money has been spent to date, although a number of projects are due to be completed at the end of this financial year. About R4.5m (of a budgeted R63m) has been spent on building a diplomatic mission and staff housing in Lilongwe, Malawi's capital. Just over R3m has been spent on renovating the ambassador's official residence in Japan, out of a projected total cost of R42m.

In response to a parliamentary question in 2009, the department said the official residence in Tokyo was deemed "unsafe" and would be undergoing "extensive" renovations which were due to start in 2010. The ambassador was meanwhile staying in rented accommodation at a cost of R1.9m a year, the response said.

The 2013 budget states that R202.9m has been budgeted for construction of new chanceries, offices and accommodation in 2013/14. This increases to R213.9m in 2014/15 and to R223.8m in 2015/16.

The department is also investigating private public partnerships for the development and construction of chanceries on vacant, state-owned land in India, Saudi Arabia, Mali, Botswana and Uruguay.

Spokesman for the Department of International Relations and Co-operation Clayson Monyela said the department had an ever-increasing mandate, but a shrinking budget. "For example, three years ago, we were not a member of Brics, but now we are."

He said expenditure on housing diplomatic missions abroad was in line with "what countries all over the world are doing, by moving away from renting... to buying".