

Article rank | 7 May 2017 | Sunday Tribune | LUNGANI ZUNGU

Frustration at state of affairs

But high praise for digital innovations

ENDLESS snaking queues in the early hours of the morning where people needing to apply for documents are a common sight at Home Affairs centres around Durban.



People queue at the Home Affairs centre in Umgeni Road, Durban. The service was supposed to have been upgraded some time ago, but complaints are now mounting of not only poor service but also the state of the department's shabby buildings.

The services provided include passports, marriage and death certificates as well as applications for citizenship.

For a month, the Sunday Tribune visited centres in the eThekweni region, including the immigration office at King Shaka International Airport.

This is the first line of contact for people who come from other countries to visit Kwazulu-natal. The Tribune's visits were prompted by complaints against Home Affairs expressing dissatisfaction at how their applications were handled.

The first stop was Umgeni Road, which is one of the biggest centres in the country.

There, as early as 5am, people were already standing in long queues waiting for the doors to open at 8am.

No one was frustrated or angry but when approached some were quick to voice their frustration about having to get up very early but still having to wait hours before getting through the main door.

Ntombikayise Dlamini, 36, who was there to apply for a smart ID card said: "I know that it's part of their internal policy to open at 8am but we plead with the management to relook at this.

"For instance, if they open at 7am and maybe start serving us at 8am we would really appreciate that."

Suresh Govender, who was waiting to apply for his passport, echoed Dlamini's sentiment. He also expressed dismay at the state of the toilets, which he described as "disgusting and inhumane".

"There are no toilet rolls and the toilets stink. It doesn't seem as though these toilets are cleaned regularly," he said, looking angry.

The toilets were, indeed, filthy and a water pipe was leaking. There was no toilet paper and it seemed some had resorted to using old newspapers to wipe themselves.

The doors of two stalls, one for men and the other for women were broken, soiled newspapers littered the floor.

A member of the public entered while the Tribune team was inside and he said: "No, I can't use this toilet," and quickly left.

With no other option, some people, including women and children, continued to use the dirty toilets throughout the morning.

However, Home Affairs officials blamed the public for the appalling state of the toilets, adding that keeping them clean was not solely their job.

At Home Affairs in Dr AB Xuma (Commercial) Road, the toilets were just as filthy.

Mduduzi Mtshali said: "I understand the long queues but I honestly struggle to understand why the toilets are not kept clean. I have been here for almost four hours, where I am supposed to relieve myself if toilets are in this mess? Worse still, there are people who come here with children."

Despite these setbacks, some had high praise for Home Affairs officials regarding the new paperless and digital innovations.

The live capture system for the smart ID card and passport applications was an effort to reduce queuing and prioritise the elderly and the disabled, said a centre manager.

This was introduced during Malusi Gigaba's tenure as home affairs minister.

Other services such as death certificates, temporary IDS and marriage certificates still required paperwork and the public still needed to supply their own pictures.

Of the 400 Home affairs offices across the country, 179 are now on the digital system.

At King Shaka Airport members of the public complimented officials behind the help desks.

The immigration centre at the airport is mostly used by people who are in the province for business or on holiday.

The Sunday Tribune also stopped at Home Affairs in Prospecton which caters for Kwamakhutha, Isipingo, umlazi and Folweni.

The centre also undertakes home visits for people unable to go to a centre due to illness or a disability.

However, many of those who use the centre have complained about the long waiting period and technological glitches.

"I went there four times and am still waiting. The system keeps going offline and they send you home when it's closing time on a Saturday.

"They told me to come any time but I waited for over an hour and then they told me to join the back of the line with over 50 people in front of me," Nimesh Govender complained.

Enraged, he said that centre was not properly managed and offered poor to no service delivery.

"I waited in line for eight hours (collectively) over two days. Always the system is offline."

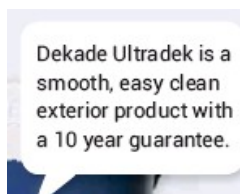
Overall, toilets, long queues and the system going offline were the common complaints.

On toilets and the state of the buildings, the director-general of Home Affairs, Mkuseli Apleni, responded: "The properties we work in are leased by the Department of Public Works, not us. We only come in with our machines and work.

"Contracts are signed by Public Works and the landlords. But we will look at this issue, although it's not our responsibility."

He also blamed the Systems Engineering and Technical Assistance (Seta) for the problems with the computer system going offline, saying the networks did not fall under Home Affairs' responsibility.

However, newly-appointed Home Affairs Minister Professor Hlengiwe Mkhize is to meet Telecommunications and Postal Services Minister Siyabonga Cwele over the issue of networks glitches.



"We are aware of the complaints regarding long queues. It's one of the things we want to

eradicate," Apleni said.

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