

New PE Refugee Reception office to start operations in October

By Afikile Lugunya - Jun 16, 2018



After numerous setbacks and years of waiting, the Department of Home Affairs is now set to officially open a new Refugee Reception Office in Port Elizabeth in October this year.

In 2011, the Department of Home Affairs announced the decision to close the Port Elizabeth Refugee Reception Office (PE RRO), for new asylum applicants.

"This was due to the local business community in the vicinity that was exerting pressure on the department, saying the office was a nuisance factor calling for immediate action. The department had to contend with court challenges against further operations of the PE RRO in the area, eviction orders and the refusal of the landlord to renew the lease agreement," said spokesperson, Thabo Mokgola.

"From the research it conducted, the department had established that clients, who sought asylum in the region primarily entered the country through the northern borders that had asylum facilities. In addition, and learning from the obtaining challenges, the department was seized with the task of conceptualising the relocation of asylum services to strategic areas, closer to where the majority of asylum seekers entered the Republic. Port Elizabeth was not such a point of entry.

"The records held at the PE reception office had indicated that those applying for asylum had hailed from China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Somalia, Ethiopia and other places. According to Home Affairs, none of them used Port Elizabeth as a port of entry.

"Home Affairs said that even after bowing to the pressure to close the Port Elizabeth office, the department continued rendering services to asylum seekers, who had already applied for refugee status. New applicants applied at the Durban, Musina and Pretoria refugee offices."

The department was petitioned to reopen the office, by, among others, the Somali Association of South Africa and the Project for Conflict Resolution and Development. A March 2015 order of the Supreme Court of Appeal brought the matter to finality.

It ordered that the refugee reception services to the Port Elizabeth Refugee Reception Centre be restored such that new applicants for asylum would be able to make applications in terms of the Refugees Act (130 of 1998) and, if they qualify, to be issued with permits.

"Subsequently, with the Department of Public Works (DPW), the department embarked on a process to find suitable accommodation for the office in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Area," explained Mokgola.

"The challenge was ensuring that the site identified for the new office took into consideration the lessons learned, including from previous sites. The department had to accommodate the needs of both refugees and asylum seekers as well as those of neighbouring communities.

"A setback was experienced when the first bidding process was cancelled, in 2016, after a bid recommendation was made. Learning from previous experience, Public Works had negotiated with the prospective landlord to add a clause that would allow for the termination of the contract in the event that a legitimate claim was lodged against the use of the building as a refugee reception office.

"During those administrative processes, the landlord withdrew from the bidding process. Other site problems that were experienced, were constantly reported to the relevant stakeholders."

Finally, a new site was secured, at 10A Gidbaud Road, Telkom Building, Sydenham (Lakeside), Port Elizabeth, following DPW's procurement process.

"As promised, and in compliance with the court order, we were assured that the new building was completed in line with specifications, properly and humanely to meet the clients' requirements.

"Accordingly, it is with a profound sense of relief that the handover ceremony was made possible, to officially pronounce on the state of readiness to reopen the office. We will finalise procurement and installation of office-related assets in the coming months," Mokgola described.

He said that it is envisaged that the relocation of IT infrastructure will be completed, at the earliest, at the end of June ahead of the opening of services to new asylum seekers, earmarked for end of October 2018.

"The department will relocate its officials and services from the old refugee centre, to the new facility, from end of July 2018. All existing clients receiving services from the old office will be advised to use the new office, from 25 June 2018.

"The new office will provide adequate accommodation with which to extend better services to persons with legitimate claims. It has a streamlined process flow, as well as open spaces, baby-changing stations and multiple ablution facilities. Provision has also been made to accommodate the Standing Committee for Refugee Affairs, Appeal Board hearings, and immigration inspectorate facilities, as was explained during the tour of the building," Mokgola said.

"We concur with the Supreme Court of Appeal that the condition of being a refugee connotes a special vulnerability as refugees by definition are persons in flight from the threat of serious human rights abuse. It has not and will never be an intention on our part to disrespect the courts, or to fail to comply with court decisions. As a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention, we remain committed to our international obligation fully to ensure the rights of refugees are upheld.

"Our work speaks for itself. Among other things, an automated booking system was implemented at Desmond Tutu Refugee Centre in Pretoria, to better manage the flow of newcomers. The new automated booking system will also be rolled out in this office – PE – and be provided for the Cape Town Refugee Reception Office.

"We are ready to address problems as they arise. How this is handled matters. The more judicious, the better. It may prove counter-productive to stir emotions without submitting concrete facts, for investigation and resolution. How people are treated will improve to the extent that we work together to remove obstacles."

Next week, the department will join the international community, on World Refugee Day, in commemorating the strength, courage and perseverance of millions of refugees.

"We are amending immigration and refugee legislation so as to find alignment with the goal of promoting human rights, socio-economic development and security. The department will continue fighting the twin-evil of corruption and bribery, in the spirit of Batho Pele.

"We will continue motivating officials to be professional, patriotic and loyal to the state and the people, at all times. Officials should know that the success of South Africa's new dawn relies on building a professional public service and a capable state," Mokgola added.

He said that on the matter of the Cape Town Refugee Reception Office, the department has commenced with plans to comply with the court order.

"A budget has been allocated, and funding for the filling of key posts has been prioritised. Home Affairs depends on Public Works for the provision of suitable office accommodation, just as it did with this new building for PE," Mokgola said.

At a handover ceremony held on Friday, which was attended by the Regional Manager of the Department of Public Works, Johan Van der Walt, and Home Affairs Director-General, Mkuseli Apleni, it emerged that the offices will have glass doors and are separated with a see-through glass, which would allow supervisors to see what is happening in all the offices without only relying on cameras.

According to the Head of Facilities in the Department of Home Affairs, Vukani Nxasana, the reason for such transparency is to eliminate corruption and bribery in the facility.

Inside the premises, there is also a waiting area for those awaiting deportation, which is separated into sections for women, men and children.

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He added that to manage the workflow, a new automated booking system will be rolled out at the facility

"Opening the new PE building for refugees and asylum seekers promises to be yet another way of ridding South Africa of negative narratives of disillusionment and pessimism," he said.

When asked how much was spent and would be spent to complete the facility, Apleni said that money was not a concern as the driving force was to provide the best facility for refugees.