

Lack of funds hampers SA's refugee offices

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THE Department of Home Affairs told Parliament that lack of funds and capacity were crippling the country's refugee reception offices.

Yesterday, MPs grilled the department over the closure of its two major refugee reception offices in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth.

Parliament heard Home Affairs was not adequately staffed, with 713 inspectorate officials.

The department's acting deputy director-general, Jackson McKay, said: "If there was an inspectorate at our facilities, people would not have to travel all the way from the north to Cape Town to apply for asylum."

McKay said the National Treasury's decision to put a ceiling on the compensation of employees' spending in government had placed their refugee reception offices under immense pressure.

"How can you manage migration if we can't police it?"

"Even if you re-prioritise, this is a department at the centre of government. It needs to be treated that way. We are saying capacitate Home Affairs to do their job, and

you won't lose money," said McKay.

The department also briefed the committee on the progress of re-opening the two refugee offices.

Parliament was told during consultations on the Immigration Amendment Bill that the country had a backlog of about 200 000 applications of asylum seekers.

Home Affairs disregarded a court order last year instructing it to re-open its refugee reception office in Cape Town by March 31.

The office building is open for renewal permits for asylum seekers who registered at the Cape Town office before its closure in June 2012. The department explained it was waiting to be assigned a building by the Department of Public Works.

The country has five refugee reception offices, however the department suspended the services to first-time applicants in two of them.

The department's acting director-general, Thulani Mavuso, said the office in Port Elizabeth would be able to process new applications by the end of October, while the Cape Town office was set to operate by early next year.