

Home affairs is urgently seeking 'a divorce'

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Minister of Home Affairs Aaron Motsoaledi (**pictured**) is urgently seeking "a divorce" from sister departments public works, the State Information Technology Agency (Sita) and Bosasa which, he says, are all hindering the work of his department.

Motsoaledi and acting director-general Thulani Mavuso appeared before Parliament's portfolio committee on home affairs this week to account for the department's financial health.

The two painted a bleak picture of a department that is severely undercapacitated and unable to keep up with the demands of service delivery, pointing to the failures of "third parties" as contributing to the underperformance of home affairs.

Mavuso revealed that the department was operating at 44% of the approved structure because of a lack of funding. He said home affairs was short of 11 432 employees.

He said the relationship with public works, which home affairs relies on for a number of its offices, had become dysfunctional.

"I want to put this as bluntly as it is. We are relying on the provision of space from public works and it is not working. It is not working because we are spending more than R300 million on an annual basis on rentals and at the end of the financial year we have nothing to show for it. Some of these offices are not adequate in terms of infrastructure; they don't cater for the live capture environment so we need a remodel before we move in," Mavuso said.

He said the department spent millions on upgrading the spaces only to be moved out of them every few years, effectively throwing money away.

He said his department had approached the sister department, asking it to buy the Lindela facility - used as a repatriation centre - which is owned by the company formerly known as Bosasa.

"We have asked public works to buy that facility so that we can at least own the facility and we can run it ourselves or get

someone else to run it so that at least that physical infrastructure is owned by public works.

"We have been told that the process is moving, but on the other side we have been informed by the liquidator that there are private interests looking to buy the facility. So you will find that public works may be overtaken by private interests.

"So we thought we should flag this to the committee as one of the challenges we face."

Motsoaledi agreed that the department was caught between a rock and a hard place, but disagreed that the purchase should be made by public works.

"What we are negotiating is that the liquidator must find a way to finalise this matter even if it is bought by a third party with whom we will renegotiate a new deal - and that is one of the things we are doing.

"I know Mavuso said the department was asking public works to buy it. I personally am not very eager for public works to buy it. If public works buys it and then next time it does not pay for electricity or for water, it is not going to be very good. So I would prefer that it is us buying the facility directly."

The minister recounted an incident when public works failed to settle an electricity bill with the City of Tshwane, resulting in the power at the home affairs office being switched off.

"That back office has been declared a national key point because if something happens to it then all of the civil matters in the country come to a halt.

"But the building is owned by public works. Last month they didn't pay the electricity, the Tshwane

municipality switched it off. When the electricity was switched off, all 412 offices might as well have closed because there was nothing anyone could do.

"They [public works] said the municipality sent them a bill of R36 million which they did not agree with and that was why the bill was not paid. If it was us paying for ourselves, we will know the consequences of querying R36 million and shutting down the whole country. That is more millions. So we are saying don't be surprised. We want to serve divorce papers on issues such as these. We would rather serve ourselves on such issues."

Mavuso lamented the relationship between the home affairs and Sita. He said that the agency had provided an unreliable network often resulting in system down times.

"A few years back Sita held a meeting with the portfolio committee of home affairs and telecommunications to discuss this issue and there were many promises that were made by Sita in 2016 on the type of service that they were going to give us to ensure that we have 99.9% network availability. As of today that has not been realised," Mavuso said.

The minister said that the issue with Sita had been raised with the president and the department was anticipating his "guidance".

"Sars [the SA Revenue Service] is not forced to be under Sita, [but] we are forced. Sita doesn't deliver - they are not; I am not bad-mouthing them.

"All government departments, wherever you go, [and you ask] why this or that didn't happen [the answer is] Sita, Sita - I still don't know why it is that they cannot do [their job]. I think the state was trying to get an agency to do its work but it is not working."

