

Scopa slams fresh plans to repair Beitbridge fence

We can't pay more for bad structure, says ANC MP

By **Aphiwe Deklerk**

Parliament's standing committee on public accounts (Scopa) has slammed plans by the department of public works and infrastructure to repair the shoddily built Beitbridge border fence.

During the sitting of Scopa yesterday, a number of MPs repeatedly criticised the plans, saying it would be wasteful expenditure to repair the fence which has been dubbed a "washing line" owing to its quality and ease with which it has been breached.

The Beitbridge project has been a thorn in the side of the department after it was revealed that it cost the government R40m to build, was not fit for purpose and proper procurement processes were not followed. It was hastily built after President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the closure of borders as part of the nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of Covid-19.

However, shortly after it was built, the fence was vandalised and proved to be easily breached by foreign nationals trying to gain access to SA.

Addressing the committee, acting director-general Imtiaz Fazel said the fence would be repaired following complaints by MPs who had visited the project last year.

"What the department has done is to commission a technical report and that has been finalised. The team recommended that the fence can be repaired under certain conditions and these repairs will consist of replacing the structural supports that were removed...", said Fezel.

But the proposed repairs did not sit well with MPs, who

called the proposal wasteful expenditure.

ANC MP Bheki Hadebe was among the most critical of the fence, saying it was not fit for purpose.

"Let me remind the colleagues that we went there, we have physically tested the strength and the quality of that fence. We have seen with our naked eyes that fence is easily breakable. It is easy to breach. It does not qualify to be called a border fence," said Hadebe.

EFF MP Veronica Mente also slammed the plans for repairs to the fence.

"The fence we saw there was actually a residential fence and not a fence meant for a border. If they (public works) are going to repair, are they repairing the same fence that can be easily breached," asked Mente.

She said if the government wanted to reinstall the same quality fence, it would constitute wasteful expenditure.

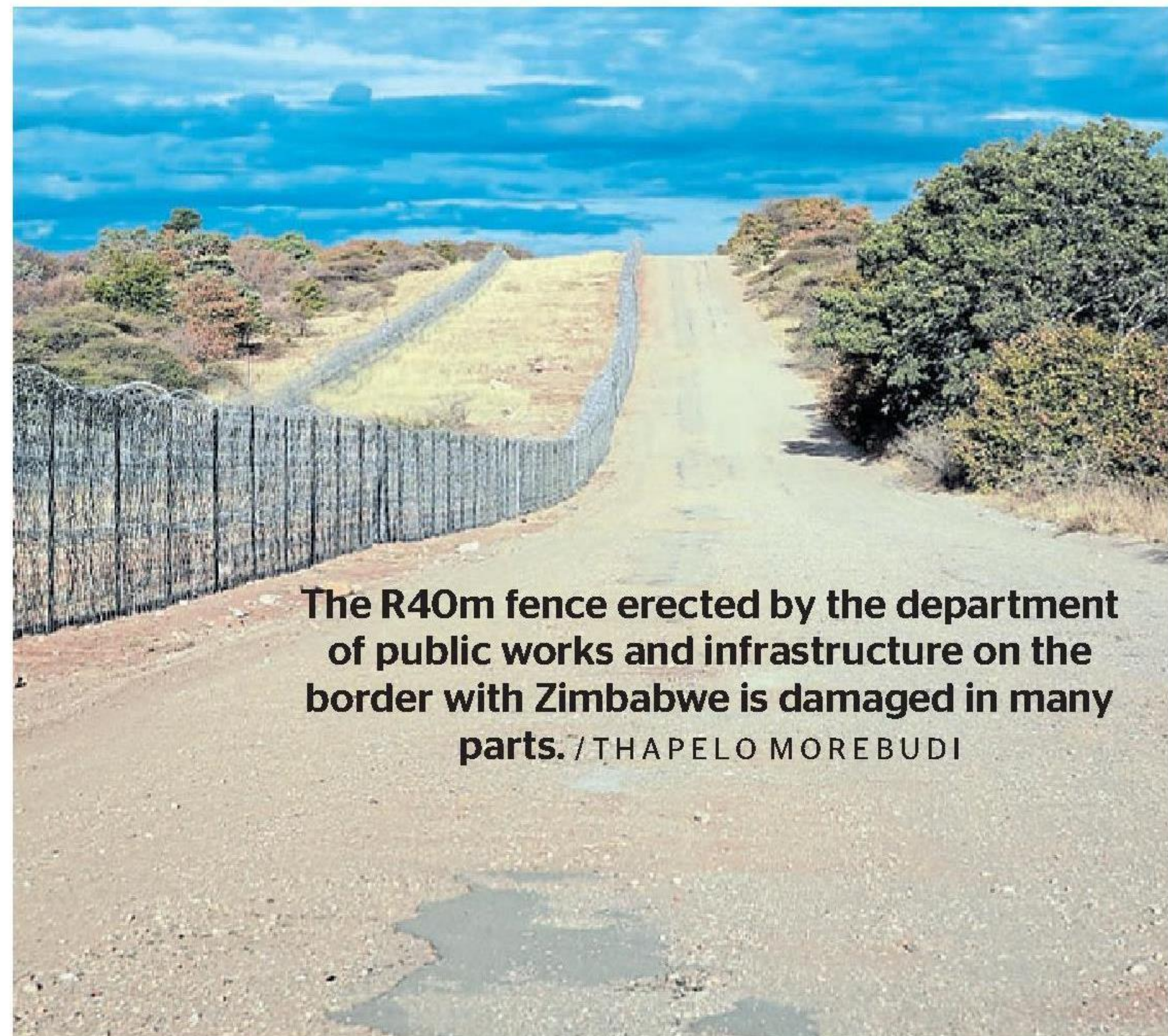
Committee chairperson Mkhuleko Hlengwa was also critical of the plans for repairs: "We can't be thinking about repairing a fence that ordinarily is not fit for purpose ... What are you actually repairing?"

Minister Patricia de Lille ended up agreeing with members of the committee over the plans for repairs.

"I certainly share the anxiety of the committee and I have also already expressed to the department that I do not accept the proposal that we repair [the fence]," said De Lille.

She said she was currently in engagement with the justice and security cluster on security issues at the borders.

"Also, I have had an engagement with the department of defence and again we agreed with the department of defence... that that fence is not fit for purpose, so any replacement, any repair, to fix the mess at Beitbridge, will not be decided by the department of public works..."



The R40m fence erected by the department of public works and infrastructure on the border with Zimbabwe is damaged in many parts. / THAPELO MOREBUDI