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‘Act fast on border fence’

DE LILLE: REQUESTS NCOP TO GET DEFENCE MINISTER TO EXPEDITE APPROVAL

➔ **Minister says the only solution is for new fencing at Beitbridge.**

Getrude Makhafola

Public Works and Infrastructure Minister Patricia de Lille on Thursday appealed to members of the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) to light a fire under Defence Minister Thandi Modise to expedite the approval of the Beitbridge border fence between South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The specifications for the fence had been sent to Modise more than a year ago, yet the project has seen little movement.

De Lille briefed the NCOP select committee on petitions and executive undertakings on measures taken since her appearance in parliament last year, to answer on the shoddy R40 million 40km Beitbridge border fence, which has been dubbed a “washing line”.

The fence project was initiated by the department in March 2020, following President Cyril Ramaphosa’s announcement of the closure of borders as part of the nationwide Covid lockdown.

The fence became the subject of criticism after photos showed it had been vandalised and the poles holding it up stolen.

According to De Lille, Modise said she needed time to familiarise herself with border control matters. De Lille then requested MPs to write to Modise and assist her department.

“Part of the reasons why we did not finalise specifications with the DOD [department of defence] was because of the change of ministers in that department, so we were told that the new minister wanted to familiarise herself with the subject.

“We all know the dire state of our borderline fence and the sooner we can start fixing and



‘WASHING LINE’. One of the many gaps in the R40 million border fence between South Africa and Zimbabwe near the Beitbridge border crossing in Limpopo. Picture: Jacques Nelles

repairing that fence to make it a strategic infrastructure project, the better.”

The department of public works and Infrastructure (DPWI) put out a request for information on 28 March last year, and received at least 26 proposals from bidders by the April 26 deadline. After evaluations by the bid adjudication committee, only three bids were found to be compliant.

These were submitted to the DOD in July 2021 for the final decision, as the department is constitutionally in charge of the country’s borders, said De Lille.

“The department of defence then indicated on 11 November, 2021 that engagements are continuing internally to approve the specifications. To date, the department hasn’t submitted anything to us, owing to their internal processes, we await that,” she said.

“Once we receive their approval,

we intend to take this project to the Infrastructure Commission Council chaired by the president, to see if we can register it as a strategic project in terms of the Infrastructure Development Act of 2014.”

Speaking at a question-and-answer session in the NCOP in March last year, De Lille said the fence won’t be repaired, as it would amount to irregular expenditure.

Her team had discovered that the fence was not fit for purpose and was noncompliant with specifications.

Investigators found at least 115 breaches that made it easy for migrants to unlawfully enter SA from Zimbabwe. Contractors Caledon River Properties CC – trading as Magwa Construction and Profteam CC – was allegedly paid millions before they could get any work done.

The company was taken to task for the shoddy work by the

Special Investigating Unit (SIU).

The SIU made disciplinary referrals to the DPWI against officials who designed, approved and implemented the Beitbridge border fence project. In March, the Special Tribunal ordered the company to pay back profits earned and to submit audited financial statements within 30 days.

De Lille said the DPWI had decided to overhaul SA’s border fences covering thousands of kilometres. “We’ve learnt our lesson with Beitbridge – where we only attended to the hot spots – that there’s a need for complete borderline security in South Africa.

“That is why, after the SIU ruling and everything that went wrong with Beitbridge, we decided we are not just going to do patch-up work only, the solution will be for new border fencing.

“My request [is] for your help by writing to the DOD to speed up the conclusion of specifications so we can start. I have a paper trail of meetings I requested, I know the [department] is fairly new but will continue requesting engagements so we can get this done.”

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The sooner we can start fixing and repairing that fence, the better