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CHILD TRAFFIC SHOCK AT BORDER



COMMISSIONER of the Border Management Authority, Michael Masiapato. | SUPPLIED

THE Border Management Authority stopped hundreds of children from being trafficked into South Africa at the weekend. | File Picture

SIYABONGA MKHWANAZI
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443 children rescued from exploitation at Beitbridge border post

THE Border Management Authority (BMA) intercepted 443 children under the age of 8 who were being trafficked from Zimbabwe into South Africa.

This according to BMA commissioner Mike Masiapato during a media briefing yesterday.

He said the children were intercepted in a sting operation that the BMA conducted with the SAPS and Home Affairs at the Beitbridge border post on Saturday.

He said human trafficking was becoming a serious problem but said there would be ongoing operations during the festive season.

"Just last night, a sting operation conducted by the border guards, the Home Affairs anti-corruption team and members of the SAPS stopped and searched 42 buses at the Beitbridge border post.

"They found about 443 children under the age of 8 who were travelling without parents or guardians; they were being trafficked into South Africa.

"We denied them entry and activated the Zimbabwean officials to process them back into Zimbabwe," said Masiapato.

Minister of Home Affairs Dr Aaron Motaaleli welcomed the commendable management of South African borders by the BMA following the successful sting operation.

"The hard work of the Border Management Authority is commendable, showing we're pulling out all stops to prevent acts of crime and illegal entry into the country. Clearly the BMA is hard at work and making inroads in effective border law enforcement," Motaaleli said.

The SAPS has over the years reported an increase in human trafficking cases.

The 2023 Global Organised Crime Index report released in September said that the country was both a source and destination for human trafficking.

The report noted the crime encompassed exploitative practices, from sex trafficking to forced labour and organ smuggling.

Masiapato said they would work with other law enforcement agencies during this time of the year.

He said in the past few months, they had stopped about 100 000 people from entering the country for various reasons – some of them were wanted by Interpol

in different parts of the world.

Masiapato said they also stopped 279 stolen cars from being taken out of the country.

"We were further able to intercept about 396 blasting cartridges as the criminal elements attempted to bring them into the Republic to be used in exploding cash-in-transit vans across the country.

"At the Kosi Bay port of entry in northern KwaZulu-Natal, we intercepted 19 tower batteries and four solar panels en-route to Mozambique. We arrested the two individuals and handed them over to SAPS detectives for further investigations," said Masiapato.

Stellenbosch University's School of Public Leadership director, Professor Zwelinzima Ndevu, said child trafficking was a huge problem in southern Africa and was likely going to increase at this time of the year.

"We will need to ensure that there are proper safety and security controls at our borders with an effective policing system. Officials need to be vigilant because as the volume of traffic increases, our system must be adaptive to new conditions while ensuring that

service delivery happens," he said.

Teddy Bear Foundation director Dr Shaheda Omar said: "It is of paramount importance that at all times the child's best interests are promoted. It is essential to ensure that those children were safe and not at further risk.

"The officials should have included their local Department of Social Development and child welfare organisations to assist in the safety and protection of these children.

"The children may have been sold by their parents and returning them back to the parents' care may place them at further risk. An inter-sectoral approach with the relevant stakeholders will have to be undertaken to prevent any secondary trauma to these children."

Regarding festive season border operations, Masiapato said it was anticipated, based on previous statistics, that 6 million people would be moving through the country's border posts.

He said there were engagements with the country's six immediate neighbouring countries on the "synchronisation of processes and other work modalities", including working hours.

Masiapato said while some of the

busiest border posts already operate on a 24-hour basis, Motaaleli had approved a request to extend the operating hours at other posts during the festive season.

In addition, 380 additional personnel will be deployed and senior members from the Border Technical Committee will visit allocated individual border posts "to provide support to the operational teams on the ground".

Masiapato said additional infrastructure had been sought including generators to mitigate the effects of load shedding on operations.

"After engagement with the Department of Public Works and Infrastructure (DPWI), they will be providing additional infrastructure such as temporary lighting, ablution facilities, special temporary barricades, and Jojo tankers for the provision of water to the travellers at the identified critical land ports.

"In addition, generators with the appropriate uninterrupt power systems are well serviced and ready to provide required energy during instances of load shedding.

"We have also deployed additional IT support teams to various ports to immediately address any kind of system glitches experienced on the ground," Masiapato said. | **Additional reporting by Mercury Reporter**