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State forced to move on mafias



Neal Froneman, Sibanye-Stillwater CEO.

The private sector is willing to muck in and help to stop crime and corruption, but the government needs to play open cards and information needs to be shared. By **Greg Ardé**

Photo: Waldo Swiegers/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Expect greater pressure on the government for transparency about its fight to catch SA's criminal kingpins. That's the word from Neal Froneman, the co-lead from business on the crime and corruption workstream convened in June by President Cyril Ramaphosa with organised business.

"A lot of good work is being done by key police units, but it seems to be being done in an uncoordinated fashion," said Froneman, CEO of mining group Sibanye-Stillwater.

He spoke to Daily Maverick about his engagement with the government since Ramaphosa established the streams. Froneman and Remgro CEO Jannie Durand jointly head up the crime and corruption workstream. Two other streams focus on transport and energy.

Ramaphosa's move was described in one report as targeting the "trifecta that may tip the country into failed nation status".

The effort has been lauded but the government has been criticised for lack of data on arrests, particularly of murderous construction mafias.

In July, DA MP Sello Seithlo submitted a Public Access to Information application ask-

ing the South African Police Service to provide details about construction mafia arrests that Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure Sihle Zikalala has repeatedly referenced.

Seithlo's demands sparked a tit-for-tat exchange, with the minister threatening the MP with legal action.

Clarity

The DA accused Zikalala of a disinformation campaign, saying repeated attempts to get clarity on arrests had proved fruitless.

Seithlo has written to the head of the Hawks, Lieutenant-General Godfrey Lebeja, asking him to designate the construction mafia and its extortion activities an official national priority crime because these have cost the economy at least R68-billion.

Activities of the criminal mafia were a direct threat to the national interest.

But, Seithlo said, instead of dealing with the politically connected mafias, the ruling ANC negotiated with them. Critics of the ruling party say the ANC's Radical Economic Transformation faction incubated the mafias.

Froneman has been deeply critical of the government, and remains so, but is broadly positive about his liaison with it. He and others have said that, if civil society and pri-

ivate sector efforts to help arrest crime and corruption didn't succeed, the country was on a fast track to becoming a failed state.

On steroids

Froneman said the work thus far has had an investment into Business Against Crime South Africa (Bacsa) to "put it on steroids".

Bacsa's Roelof Viljoen said information about arrests and convictions is vital to measure the extent and impact of the mafia and to determine an appropriate response.

Viljoen has advocated that businesses affected by the mafia share information to protect themselves. Some sectors, such as telecommunications and metals, already cooperate. The private sector risk analysis sometimes results in information sharing with authorities, in spite of fears of corruption.

Froneman said civil society and business could not attempt to duplicate police work nor try to interfere with the independence of the National Prosecuting Authority.

The answer was to "capacitate the state" and one way to do that was to make sure intelligence captured by Bacsa resulted in more criminals being arrested.

"There is a lot we can do to disrupt ... organised crime. We can help catch the kingpins.

We can capacitate by helping the police improve their forensic laboratories, for example. Another way would be through the use of data [to] keep track of arrests and convictions and track the lines between criminals."

Froneman said the engagement with the government "is working", but the private sector was "pretty firm" that, if the president has committed to this, he must ensure it happens.

The collaboration between business and government involves engagements between officials and private sector companies, including Sibanye's head of security, Nash Lutchnan, a former SAPS brigadier.

Lethargic

Lutchnan said state commitment ranges between enthusiastic and lethargic.

"Organised crime has a handle everywhere. In corrupt officials and politicians, it offers a bird's eye view of opportunity. What this translates into is mafia figures who swan around in Armani suits at the top."

Identifying kingpins is critical, he said. "It is frustrating to be in a meeting when you are trying to mobilise government and they just rehash the same talking points.

"The approach is lethargic. We need to aggregate information so we can tackle syndicates successfully."

Froneman said the work of the stream was, simply put, aimed at the good guys sharing notes about the bad guys.

Seithlo is determined to make information on the mafia arrests public. "My job is to hold the minister to account. He has said between 200 and 682 people have been arrested. We need to verify this."

Zikalala's spokesperson, Lennox Mabaso, said he was satisfied the state's response to construction mafias was appropriate.

This week, the Inclusive Society Institute released a report into the construction industry, historically a key economic driver. It said the contribution of the industry (comprising mining, manufacturing and construction) to GDP had been declining in the past three decades, from 31.2% in 1994 to 24.4% in 2022.

The report, quoting the Treasury, said the prolonged underperformance was down to subdued investment, diminished confidence, unsustainable undercutting on tender prices and a surge in organised crime. **DM**

For help in dealing with the mafia, contact Bacsa on 011 883 0717. For guidelines about extortion, visit <https://e2.bac.org.za/>. This article was made possible, in part, by a grant from the Henry Nxumalo Foundation.

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